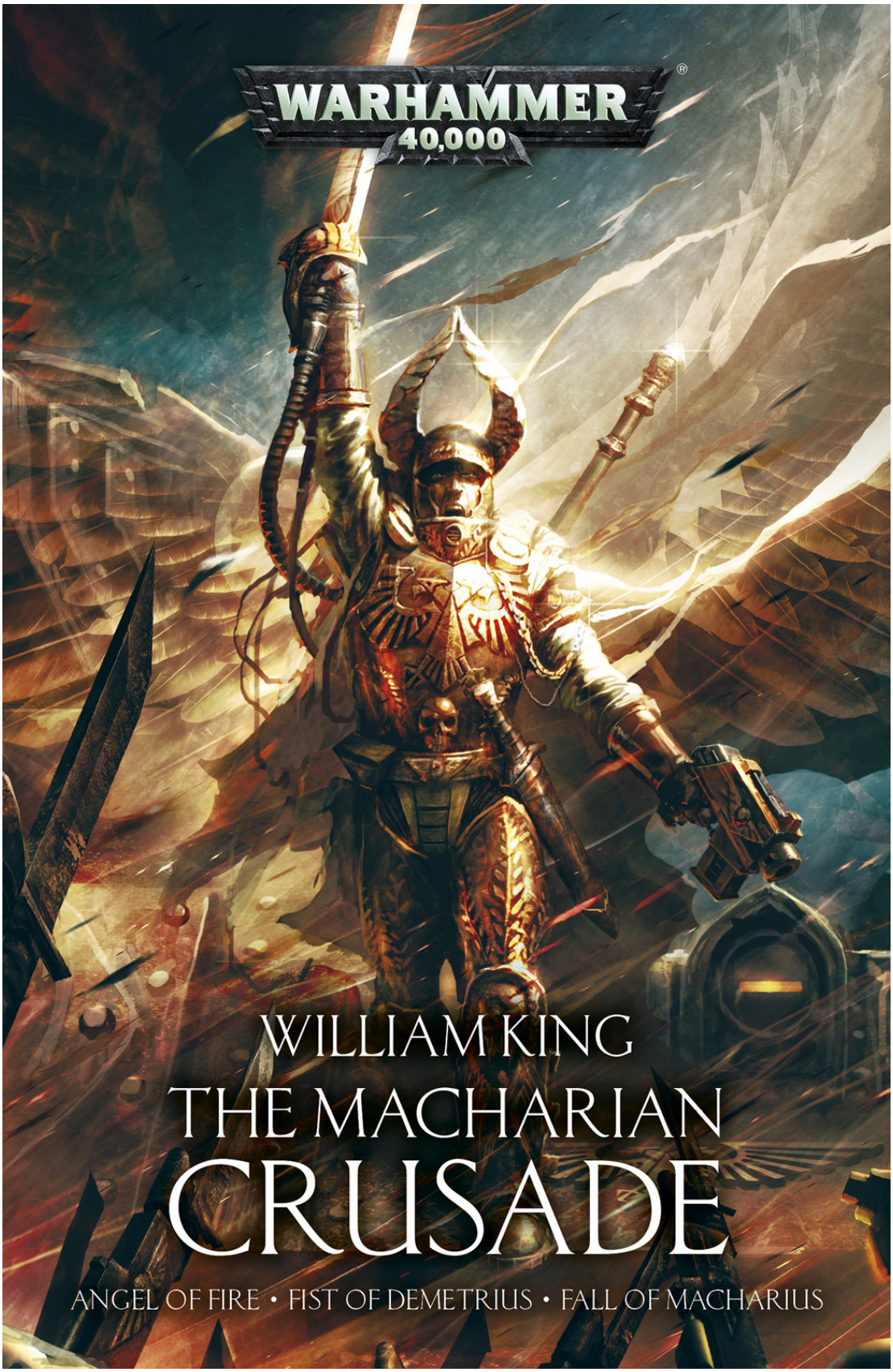
WILLIAM KING

THE MACHARIAN CRUSADE

ANGEL OF FIRE • FIST OF DEMETRIUS • FALL OF MACHARIUS


WARHAMMER
40,000
WILLIAM KING
THE MACHARIAN
CRUSADE
ANGEL OF FIRE • FIST OF DEMETRIUS • FALL OF MACHARIUS

OceanofPDF.com

BACKLIST

More Warhammer 40,000 stories from Black Library

• THE MINKA LESK SERIES •
By Justin D Hill
Book 1: CADIA STANDS
Book 2: CADIAN HONOUR

SHADOWSWORD
A novel by Guy Haley

BANEBLADE
A novel by Guy Haley

YARRICK
An omnibus edition of the novels *Imperial Creed*, *The Pyres of Armageddon*, the novella *Chains of Golgotha* and several short stories by David Annandale

STRAKEN
An 'Iron Hand' Straken novel by Toby Frost

THE MACHARIAN CRUSADE
An omnibus edition of the novels *Angels of Fire*, *Fist of Demetrius* and *Fall of Macharius* by William King

• GAUNT'S GHOSTS •
By Dan Abnett

THE FOUNDING
An omnibus edition containing books 1–3:
First and Only*, *Ghostmaker* and *Necropolis

THE SAINT
An omnibus edition containing books 4–7:
Honour Guard*, *The Guns of Tanith*, *Straight Silver* and *Sabbat Martyr

THE LOST
An omnibus edition containing books 8–11:
Traitor General, His Last Command, The Armour of Contempt* and *Only in Death

Book 12: BLOOD PACT

Book 13: SALVATION'S REACH

Book 14: THE WARMASTER

Book 15: ANARCH

Space Marine Battles

WAR OF THE FANG
A Space Marine Battles book, containing the novella *The Hunt for Magnus* and the novel *Battle of the Fang*

THE WORLD ENGINE
An Astral Knights novel

DAMNOS
An Ultramarines collection

DAMOCLES
Contains the White Scars, Raven Guard and Ultramarines novellas *Blood Oath, Broken Sword, Black Leviathan* and *Hunter's Snare*

OVERFIEND
Contains the White Scars, Raven Guard and Salamanders novellas *Stormseer, Shadow Captain* and *Forge Master*

ARMAGEDDON
Contains the Black Templars novel *Helsreach* and novella *Blood and Fire*

Legends of the Dark Millennium

SHAS'O
A Tau Empire collection

ASTRA MILITARUM
An Astra Militarum collection

ULTRAMARINES
An Ultramarines collection

FARSIGHT
A Tau Empire novella

SONS OF CORAX
A Raven Guard collection

SPACE WOLVES
A Space Wolves collection

Visit blacklibrary.com for the full range of novels, novellas, audio dramas and Quick Reads, along with many other exclusive products

OceanofPDF.com

CONTENTS

Cover
Backlist
Warhammer 40,000
Title Page
Gone for a Soldier
Angel of Fire
 Map
 Chapter One
 Chapter Two
 Chapter Three
 Chapter Four
 Chapter Five
 Chapter Six
 Chapter Seven
 Chapter Eight
 Chapter Nine
 Chapter Ten
 Chapter Eleven
 Chapter Twelve
 Chapter Thirteen
 Chapter Fourteen
 Chapter Fifteen
 Chapter Sixteen
 Chapter Seventeen
 Chapter Eighteen
 Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Fist of Demetrius
Prologue
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Fall of Macharius
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-One
About the Author
An Extract from ‘Sabbat Crusade’
A Black Library Publication
eBook license

OceanofPDF.com

WARHAMMER 40,000

It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars,

only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

OceanofPDF.com

WARHAMMER 40,000

THE MACHARIAN CRUSADE

ANGEL OF FIRE • FIST OF DEMETRIUS • FALL OF MACHARIUS

WILLIAM KING

BLACK LIBRARY

OceanofPDF.com

GONE FOR A SOLDIER

OceanofPDF.com

That night our lives changed utterly. If I close my eyes I can still picture it perfectly: the winter-cold street, the hundred-storey tenement blocks rising all around us, the flickering gaslights, the crunch of soot-stained snow beneath our boots. We crossed Stormspike Span where it leapt across the thousand-foot drop between the Factory Sector and the Forgemarket and emerged onto the deck of Urban Level Twelve. In the distance, as far as the eye could see, enormous towers and chimneys rose into the night and over everything, belching sparks and flames, loomed the sky-tall smokestack of Murdstone's Forge.

The cold numbed my face. A snowflake gave up its chemical tang on my tongue. Anton danced around us, waving his fists and squaring up to Ivan in a clownish fashion. He was full of mad chatter as usual, talking about how the Adeptus Astartes were the greatest heroes of humanity, had superhuman powers and lived for thousands of years. He was convinced that if you were brave enough, loyal enough and prayed hard enough, you too could become a Space Marine.

If any of that had been true poor Anton would have achieved his ambition and some of the rest of us might have too. We certainly thought it was possible then but we were young and had never seen anything except what existed beneath the dull, polluted sky of Belial. We didn't know any better.

Ivan was a quiet, serious boy, tall and muscular with a long face and dark curly hair. He carried himself with the poise of an up-and-coming pit-boxer. He dreamed of getting away from the grind of the factory, of making his fortune beating out the brains of others for the pleasure of the rich who

came down to the pits at Judson's Maze. When he was rich, he said, he would open a gin-house and we could have free drink and food whenever we liked. He was a generous boy, and to us, constantly hungry and constantly poor, it sounded like a vision of heaven.

In the few hours he had after work he practised in the gymnasium on Hyde Street along with all the other would-be pit fighters and some of the hard boys of our neighbourhood. Even then he was not a lad you messed with – well, not more than once. He was quick with his hands and fast with his feet and when he hit you, you felt as if you had been struck by one of the great descending pistons in the cog-house of the factory. I sparred with him a few times. It was a mistake I did my best not to repeat when I got older and a little wiser.

That night Ivan planned to graft on his kicks and punches and Anton and I were simply killing time. We did not want to go back to the tiny apartments we shared with our families and throw ourselves down on our pallets and wake up muscles aching to go back to work the next day. The street was our best and only entertainment and you never knew who you might run into if you hung out there long enough.

If we had known what was going to happen we would have run home and locked the doors and windows and counted ourselves lucky, but we didn't and thus our lives were altered, Macharius was saved, and the Imperium still exists in this part of our dark and terrible galaxy.

'What was that?' Anton asked. We had all heard the noise but I was pretending I had not. It was a scream and the sounds of someone in pain as well as low gruff voices speaking with menace. It had come from a side alley between the huge buildings. Overturned waste bins lay everywhere. Rats as big as dogs scuttled away in panic, chittering to each other in their strange, sub-human language. They wanted no more to do with this than I did.

A voice called out for someone to stop. I recognised it. So did the others. I could tell from the look on their faces. It belonged to old Citizen Chiltern, who lived on the same floor of our building with his sick wife. I looked at Ivan. Ivan looked at me. Anton's head scanned from side to side as if he could not decide who he was going to look at. Without another word, Ivan strode into the alley, through the clouds of condensation vented through the

grille of the sub-deck thermal system. Anton followed him.

I glanced up and down the street. It had become suddenly and mysteriously empty. Windows were shuttered, doors slammed. I took a deep breath and followed my friends, much against my better judgement.

Citizen Chiltern lay in the ash-tainted snow. Two large men in heavy overcoats were kicking him. Ivan already had his hands on the shoulders of one of them.

‘Stop,’ he said.

The biggest man turned and looked at him. He had a broken nose and a face as pock-marked as the surface of a mining asteroid. ‘Go away, nadhead,’ he said. ‘This is none of your business.’

‘Leave him alone,’ Ivan said. ‘Leave Citizen Chiltern alone. I know him.’

The big man reached out to shove Ivan away. Ivan’s left hand flicked out. It looked as if he had only stroked the big man’s face but the leg-breaker fell to the ground, blood erupting from his nose.

‘What the hell?’ said his companion.

Ivan didn’t wait. His right hand hit the man in his stomach, doubling him over. Ivan’s knee came up to meet the bruiser’s descending chin. No sooner had the second man fallen than Anton was on him, hands round his throat, starting to bang his head on the snowy pavement. If I had not dragged him off, I have no doubt he would have carried on doing it until the leg-breaker’s skull was broken.

It took all of my strength to restrain Anton, who seemed just as willing to fight with me as with the strangers. He was a skinny kid but wiry, and if I had not got the drop on him and held him from behind, things would have gone badly for me.

Ivan just stood there, watchful but ready. His face was pale. It was starting to dawn on him what he had done. His punches had been reflexive. You don’t swing on a conditioned fighter like Ivan without getting that automatic response. I know that now myself, although it took months of hand-to-hand combat training to make me that way.

The first of the leg-breakers was helping his friend to his feet. He turned and glared at us. ‘You boys are in trouble now,’ was all he said. I did not doubt it for a moment. His small eyes flickered. His gaze took in all of our faces as though memorising them, and instinctively I turned away. I tried to make it look as if I was getting ready to help Citizen Chiltern but really all I

was doing was trying to escape notice.

‘If Leo lets me go, I’ll show you who is in trouble,’ shouted Anton. I cursed him under my breath for mentioning my name. The leg-breakers were already moving away up the alley. One of them was limping, the other clutching his head. Ivan stood there still as a statue, watching them vanish into the vented cloud. Anton raved threats. I told him to calm down. I might as well have ordered him to spread his arms and fly to the smaller moon for all the good it did. Once I was certain the thugs were long gone, I released Anton and bent down to help Citizen Chiltern up. Anton raced to the mouth of the alley, shouting, ‘That’s right, run!’

I knew he was just compounding our mistake. Citizen Chiltern looked even older and slower than usual. His hair was lank. His face was bruised. One eye was already swollen shut. He moved painfully to his feet, trying to push himself up with his good hand.

‘You should not have done that, boys,’ he said. ‘Those were Cleaver’s men.’

The words made my mouth go dry. All strength drained from my limbs. Ivan shrugged. I could tell he was thinking that it was too late to do anything about it now.

‘What do they want with you?’ I asked. ‘You’re nothing to Cleaver.’

‘I borrowed money from Little Tobey. My wife needed medicine and I haven’t worked since my hand got crushed in the pressing machine.’ The old man sounded almost apologetic. He looked guilty too, as if he was the one who had been caught committing a crime.

‘You should have asked me,’ Ivan said. ‘I would have got it for you.’

If Ivan was capable of this, it was news to me. As far as I knew he was as broke as the rest of us.

‘I couldn’t do that, lad,’ said Citizen Chiltern. I didn’t need to ask why. He was too proud to beg from the people in his own building. Not too proud to visit our local loan shark, though. He glanced at me and something in my sour expression must have told him what I was thinking. ‘I already pawned everything I could,’ he said.

Anton had returned now. He looked calmer. His face was a little pale. He had heard the bit about the leg-breakers being Cleaver’s men. ‘I’m not scared,’ he said although no one had said he was.

‘I am,’ said Ivan. ‘I’ve heard what Cleaver does to people who cross him.’

We all had. Vivid images swum up through my mind. As fast as I forced them down, they found a new way to escape.

‘Come on,’ I said to Citizen Chiltern. ‘Let’s get you home.’

The old man looked at some broken alembics scattered on the ground nearby. He bent over again and began to pick up paper packets with alchemical runes on them.

‘Medicine,’ he said. ‘For my wife. She’s not very well.’

‘You did what?’ My father never raised his voice when he was angry. He just got quieter. His jaw grew tight and a small, savage smile twisted the corners of his lips upward. He looked as if he wanted to hit me again. I kept my hands up instinctively, ready to block any punch.

‘I did not mean to,’ I said, aware that I sounded like a child about to be punished, my voice high and thin as I strained to force the words out. I paused, took a breath and started again, pitching my voice lower this time and speaking as slowly and distinctively as my father did when he was angry. ‘The man swung at Ivan, Ivan hit him and then he hit the other one and then Anton jumped in. What was I supposed to do?’

My father shook his head and made a small tut-tutting sound. He let out a long breath and looked at the ceiling. I knew he was counting to ten, and placing a short prayer to the Emperor between every number of the count. When he had finished, his hands were unclenched and he slumped down in the room’s one battered chair. He looked old and grey and tired in the one flickering gaslight of the small room.

‘They could have been armed,’ he said. ‘They could have been carrying…’

My father knew about such things. The small income he made by doing odd-jobs around the Forgemarket was squandered on gambling at clip joints owned by Cleaver, or more rarely blown on binges in Cleaver’s gin palaces. In his youth, which he only ever talked about when he was very drunk, he had run with a gang. They had done some pretty wild things, if you believed his stories, which I did.

‘But they weren’t.’

‘You can bet the next bunch will be. And you won’t outnumber them either.’

‘I already worked that out for myself,’ I said. ‘You are not helping.’

‘Clever boy,’ he said. It was his customary sneer and a particularly stupid

one, for he was a clever man himself. Maybe that was what made him bitter. There was no benefit to being clever in the back alleys of the Forgemarket. It only left you aware of how trapped you were. ‘Always such a clever boy.’

‘What’s done is done,’ I said. ‘There’s nothing I can do about it.’

It was the fatalism of the Forgemarket speaking. We had made one small stupid mistake, let our guards down for one fatal instant, stuck our noses into a place where they should not have been and we were going to have to pay for it. I knew it. My father knew. Ivan knew it. Possibly only Anton didn’t know it, and even he suspected.

My father fell silent and stared at the small cold gas fire that did not heat our room. The gas had been cut off a few days before and I was not sure whether it was because he had gambled away the money to pay for it or it was simply one of the regular interruptions of service. They were becoming more and more common.

A roach the size of my hand sauntered along the cluster of pipes that ran across the ceiling corner before vanishing through the hole in the wall where the pipes left our room and ran into the neighbours.

I pulled my patched coat tighter around me and listened to the sounds of our building settling down to sleep. A dozen people were still outside waiting to use the shared lavatory. The babies in the room next door had finally stopped crying. My father got up and pulled his bed out of the wall. I lay down on the mat beside the cold fire and gazed up at the icon of Saint Aganostes that my mother had left. He was bowing down before the throne on which the Emperor lived out his death in life, a halo blazing around his head while the spirits of the primarchs looked down. I have since found out that it would be considered a heretical image by most of the Ecclesiarchy, but at the time it seemed to me to be the very incarnation of piety.

Sleep was a long time coming. I lay shivering, not sure whether it was the winter chill or fear. My thoughts kept turning to the thing that my father kept in the locked box hidden below the creaky floor-blocks. I was wondering whether I was going to have to steal it.

I suppose even then I had the beginnings of a plan. It gathered itself in the small dark corners of my mind, hiding there because it was too scary for me to contemplate openly yet.

‘What are we going to do?’ Anton asked. He was not dancing around now.

He was not squaring up to anybody. He looked as subdued as I had ever seen him and I realised then exactly how bad things were. Even Anton was frightened. People stared at us in the crowded vestibule. A few of them even looked at us admiringly. Word of what we had done had got around. That was bad. It meant Cleaver would have to do something. His power was based on fear. He could not be seen to be defied by anybody.

'I don't know,' said Ivan. He was looking at me for some cue. I was the clever one. I was the one who was supposed to figure out how to make things right. I did not have the heart to tell him that I could not see any way out of this. I pushed through the great swing doors, wanting to get away from all of those accusing gazes. The cold slapped me in the face. My breath came out in great clouds.

I glanced around the street. It was the usual scene on a usual morning. Thousands of workers trudged through the polluted snow. The same giant figures of Imperial heroes looked down on us from every junction, statues carved in a richer age to celebrate the Guardsmen who had defended our world in the Imperium's countless wars. A train whizzed past overhead, visible for a moment through the dirt-smeared plexiglass sides of the pneumatic tube along which it rushed. It all looked so normal. There was no sign that the world had changed. Whatever threats there were out there, they were not visible.

Anton gestured at the giant recruiting poster pasted to the walls of the tenement. It showed a uniformed Guardsman staring heroically towards the distant horizon. If you are of a certain age and from Belial, you probably know it. At that time, they adorned every street.

'We could join the Guard,' Anton said. 'Become Space Marines.'

'Would you shut up about that?' I said. Anton had been going on at us for years to join the Imperial Guard. It was his dream. He produced the book from a pocket in his overalls. It was tatty and dog-eared and its cover was missing. He held it with the same reverence as people hold their prayer books in the cathedral. I suppose for him it was a sort of sacred object although, looking at it, most would only have seen a cheap propaganda novel of the sort the planetary government printed and distributed in millions. Anton must have read that book a hundred times. It was amazing. He could barely read a technical manual, his lips moved and he had to follow the ideograms with his finger, but he kept going back to that one

stupid storybook.

‘No! We could join the Guard and we could become Space Marines. Cleaver would not dare touch us then.’

I could see how much the idea appealed to him, to us all, I suppose if I am honest. He loved the idea that he could be transformed into someone else, someone powerful, someone who mattered. Being beyond the reach of the likes of Cleaver was as potent a dream as his head could hold without exploding.

‘And how are we supposed to achieve this before Cleaver’s boys find us?’ I sneered. I spoke so loudly that heads turned to look at us and a space cleared around. It was as if I had suddenly revealed we all had some vile contagious disease.

‘Easy,’ said Anton. ‘We go to the recruiting office, sign the papers, and take the Emperor’s oath.’

‘What about our indentures to the Machine Guild?’ I asked. ‘They don’t like it if you break contract.’

‘The Guard are always looking for volunteers and they ask no questions. They don’t care if you have a contract with the guild. They don’t care if you are wanted by the Arbites. And people say you do better if you step forward of your own free will and not wait for your number to come up in the Conscription Quota Lottery.’

‘He has a point, you know,’ said Ivan quietly.

‘Not you too,’ I said. ‘You want to go for a soldier?’

‘Why not? It beats waiting here to have our hands chopped off,’ Anton said.

The entrance of the factory was coming closer. I could see the security guards with their guns and their badges standing beneath the huge, age-blurred statues of Industry and Production that flanked the iron railings of the gates. They made me feel a bit safer. Not even a maniac like Cleaver would do anything to us while we were at work. Messing with the Machine Guild was a death sentence even for the likes of him. They took the defence of their property and the free flow of their goods very seriously. Just ask the cultists who tried to start a union – if you can find them. Start your search at the bottom of the sump pools. That is where you will most likely find the bodies.

I looked at them as I would look at any other pair of idiots who tried to

talk me into signing my own death warrant. ‘Because it’s not like in Anton’s book.’ Even today I am quite proud of the amount of venom I managed to work into the word *book*. ‘In the Guard the Emperor’s enemies shoot at you with real bolter shells and real las-beams and no one survives those heroic last stands Anton likes to go on about.’

‘How would you know?’ Anton asked. ‘Have you ever been at one?’

It was a fair question and he was asking it honestly. ‘Have you ever met anybody who survived one?’

Anton shrugged. ‘They are all off-planet. Or they are Space Marines.’

He said that the way he would have said they had gone to heaven.

‘Open your eyes, Anton,’ I said. ‘Where do you think the limbless beggars you see on every street corner come from? Where do you think Harry No-Legs mislaid his kneecaps? And they are the lucky ones. Ask them! I have.’

‘So you like to talk to beggars who can tell a good story,’ Anton said.

‘And you like to read idiotic prop-novs,’ I said. ‘No – let me rephrase that – the same idiotic prop-nov over and over again.’

‘It’s not idiotic,’ Anton said. He sounded genuinely hurt but I was too angry and too scared to feel much guilt. The masked guards looked at us and we punched in. Under their hard stares we fell silent and suited up and got to work at the sirens’ first blast.

We donned our heavy rhino-beetle carapace work clothes, our metal masks with their crystal visors and huge insulated gauntlets, and strode out onto the oil-stained floor of the factory. Back then it was the Great Pre-Macharian Depression. The machines upon which Belial’s industry depended were running down from lack of off-world parts. We were reduced to hand-crafting servo-mechanisms to replace them, not all of which functioned as they should. We did our best to duplicate the products of men who had known what they were doing on a distant planet hundreds of years before. The results, as you might imagine, were not very good. Machines that had, according to my father, worked unceasingly for centuries needed to be repaired every few weeks and there were so many of them that we were kept constantly busy at our work-benches beneath the great flame-belching blast furnaces.

We worked amid the clatter and boom of the great factory. It left us too much time with our own dark thoughts.

It did not take long for Cleaver to track us down. They came after our double shift at the factory finished. We were walking across Stormspike Span when a massive groundcar swung up beside us and a dozen big men leapt out. Before we knew it the three of us were pinned against the wall of the bridge, a thousand-foot drop behind us, held in grips that not even Ivan could break. I looked around and again the street had mysteriously emptied.

Only then did Little Tobey get out of the groundcar. He was shorter than his men, broader and heavier, and not all of that was fat. He had the face of an overweight bird of prey – huge jowls, hooked nose, cold, flinty eyes. A fine fur of hair covered his bullet head. He looked at us with an expression that I found merely frightening because I did not then understand it. I do now. It was the look of a very, very hard man sent to do a job that embarrassed him and that he did not really want.

He punched the palm of his left hand with the fist of his right. It made the sound of a face being slapped very hard. It was somehow more frightening than if he really had slapped one of us. There was a sense of restraint, of controlled violence about it. He was letting us know what he could do, rather than doing it.

'Well, boys,' he said, 'you've caused me a little problem.' His voice was a low growl. You had to strain to hear him and you did because you knew that if you missed what he had to say something terrible might happen. It was an effective trick. I've known commissars since who used the same one but none of them did it better than Little Tobey. He would have made a fine commissar.

The flinty eyes sized us up. He wanted us to be in no doubt that he was a man who solved the little problems that came his way. None of us said anything. I would have apologised but my mouth was too dry to get the words out. I wriggled a little but the heavy hands holding me in place pushed me back against the wall with irresistible force.

'Yes,' he said. 'You have. You interfered with a collection and you embarrassed a couple of my boys.'

I looked around to see if I could see the men Ivan had dropped. They were not there. Little Tobey was a good enough manager to make sure of that. If they had been, tempers would have run high and things might have got out of control, and he was not a man who liked to have that happen.

He walked up and down in front of us and looked at each of us in turn.

Anton and Ivan met his gaze. I struggled to hold it for a few heartbeats and then looked away. Tobey shook his head with theatrical sadness. He was close enough that I could smell the wave of cologne displaced through the air.

'What am I going to do with you three?' he asked with the air of a parent confronting wayward children. He exhaled and his breath formed a small cloud in the cold air. He took out a tube of violet-scented breath-fresheners and popped half the roll into his mouth, crunching them with his metal teeth. It should have been ridiculous. Instead it was terrifying, like watching a great carnivore nibble a morsel of flesh while it considers eating you.

'I hear you are a fighter,' he said. A sausage-like finger jabbed out at Ivan's chest.

Ivan nodded.

'It's a hard thing to fight when you've had your hand fed into a meat-grinding machine.'

There was nothing anybody could say to that. We all knew he was not discussing a fanciful situation. 'My boss likes to do that. I mean he enjoys it. It gives him real pleasure,' Little Tobey said. He sounded thoughtful now, as a man is likely to be when considering the foibles of an employer. 'If I took the three of you to him now, what do you think he would do to you all?'

He looked at us all again, giving us ample chance to consider the answer. After a silence that went on for far too long he said, 'I think we all know the answer.'

It dawned on me that he had only asked the question because he did not intend to do that. Looking at the others I could see I was the only one who realised this.

'What… what are you going to do?' It took me a huge effort to force the words out. The fact the effort was visible made me feel humiliated and I think planted small seeds of murder in my heart. I became aware that along with the fear, somewhere, buried very deep was a burning rage. I suspected the two were related.

'I was told you were quick,' said Tobey. 'Seems I was told right. Here's how it is… You made some of my boys look bad. But you're quick, likely lads – hard too – and I would hate to see that talent go to waste. You collect the money for me from Chiltern and I will see what I can do with the

Cleaver. And when I say “collect” I mean make an example of. I want them dropped down a lift shaft. Chiltern and his wife. Do it and we’ll talk. Don’t and…’ He raised his right arm. He had withdrawn his hand into his sleeve of his very fine coat so it was no longer visible. It looked like he was clowning. Nobody laughed. ‘You’ve got till tomorrow morning.’

He clapped his hands. His boys let us go and before we had time to react, they had withdrawn into the big groundcar and swept away. Ivan stood there shaking his head. Anton was throwing up into the snow. I stood and watched the groundcar sweep off. I knew that it was taking my whole future with it.

‘What are we going to do?’ Anton asked. He was paler than the tainted snow. We stood in the vestibule of the tenement. It was warmer than my apartment would be and I did not want my father to overhear this discussion. If he was even there, which was not at all certain.

‘I don’t know,’ I said.

‘We could be part of Cleaver’s gang,’ Anton said. I could see he was turning the idea over in his mind and that it appealed to some part of him.

‘You going to be the one to drop old Chiltern and his missus down the elevator shaft?’ Ivan asked. ‘I’m not.’

He had a deep stubborn streak in him, even as a boy. Some might have said a self-destructive one too. I am in two minds about that myself.

‘It’s them or us,’ said Anton. He was trying to sound vicious but he ended up sounding merely pathetic.

‘You think a Space Marine would do that?’ Ivan asked.

Anton looked ashamed.

‘We’re not going to get to be part of the Cleaver’s mob, idiot boy,’ I said. That got both of their attentions.

‘You’ve already worked it out, have you?’ Anton asked. He sounded like my father accusing me of being a clever boy.

‘It’s not about recruiting us. It’s about power. It’s about them showing they can make us do what they want.’

‘Well, they can, can’t they?’ Anton said.

‘Look, we do over Chiltern and his wife and we’ve done a first-degree murder. They don’t have to kill us. They can hand us over to the Arbites and they’ll execute us for them.’

Even as I said the words I knew I was right. It was brilliant in its way. The long arm of the law would be seen to do Cleaver's work for him. It would make it look as if the judges were in collusion with the gangs, and everyone would be even more afraid of going to the law than they were now.

'If we don't,' Anton said. He raised his arm with the hand withdrawn into the sleeve just as Tobey had done. 'It might be better.'

'I'm not doing it,' Ivan said.

'Simple as that?' I said. To tell the truth, I admired him more than I could find the words to say in that moment. I resented him just as much. That's the way with heroes. They really rub your nose in your own inadequacy. It was all very easy for him.

'Simple as that,' he said. 'Good night.'

He turned on his heel and walked away towards the tiny apartment he shared with his aunt and his cousins. Anton looked at me. There was a shifty expression on his face. His hands were balled up tight, his shoulders hunched forward. Something cold glittered in his eyes.

'Well, Leo,' he said. 'It looks like it's up to you and me.'

We banged on the door of Chilterns' apartment and heard the old man's slow shuffling steps coming closer through the thin plas-fibre. Anton looked at me, a tight grin pasted on his mouth, his eyes narrowed, his pupils pin-sharp. I heard Chiltern breathing as he put his eye to the security-socket and inspected us. A moment later, chains rattled and the door opened.

'It's you boys,' he said. The relief in his voice was evident. All of us knew who he was expecting. 'Come in, citizens.'

We did, and a bunch of people passing on the way to their own chambers saw us do it. Whatever happened, they would remember. There would be witnesses for the Arbites to question.

Chiltern's wife lay on a bed, wrapped in blankets that had the sickly sweet smell of age and illness and death. An old mechanical clock, obviously their most treasured possession, ticked the hours and minutes of the old woman's dying loudly away in the corner. The old man turned his back on us. Anton nudged me with his elbow. I don't know what he expected me to do – produce a cosh and bludgeon the old man on the back of the head perhaps.

'It's Anton and Leo, dear,' Old Chiltern said. 'Two of the boys who helped me last night. I was telling you about them.'

The old woman raised herself painfully up on her elbow and blinked at us. Her breathing was raspy and loud. It sounded like her lungs were filled with phlegm. The thought sauntered sideways into my head that she did not have much time left anyway. It would be a mercy to put her out of her misery.

‘You boys are very brave,’ she said. ‘Fighting off those robbers like that.’

So Chiltern had not told her who the robbers really were or why they were attacking him. He stared at us with entreaty in his eyes, silently pleading for us not to share the information. He wanted her to die in peace. I gave a slight nod. He looked pathetically grateful. I hated him in that moment for being so weak and so kind and so thoughtful.

Chiltern had made his way over to the corner where the sink and an ancient cooking burner stood. A small loaf of bread and a carton of protein paste was on a plate. There was one small chipped cup. He picked up the bread and paste, brought it over, and handed it to Anton. For a moment, I feared he would brain the old man with it. Chiltern went back and got his glass. There was some murky cold tea in it. ‘It’s not much but it’s all we can offer you,’ he said.

Anton’s face wore a ghastly grin now and he kept nodding and winking at me. I realised that confronted with the reality of dragging this pair of geriatrics to the lift shaft and tossing them down, he was stumped. He could not bring himself to do it. He wanted me to.

‘What do you boys want?’ Chiltern asked. He obviously had picked up something of the strangeness of the situation. There was a worried note in his voice. ‘You’re not in any trouble, are you?’

And if we were what could you do about it, old man? I wanted to ask. Instead I said, ‘We just wanted to make sure you were all right.’ I was surprised at how smoothly the lie came out. Somewhere, somehow, a decision had been made. The cold little monster that had come up with my plan was getting ready to step out of the shadows.

‘Yes, that’s right,’ said Anton. ‘That’s what we wanted. We brought you some food.’ He produced an old paper package of sweets from his pocket and tried to thrust them at the old man, who refused.

‘That’s very kind of you, boys,’ the old lady said. ‘But we don’t need anything, do we, Albert?’

The old man nodded. We stood there in uncomfortable silence for a few moments and then I said, ‘Well then, we had best be going.’

‘Come again, any time, boys,’ they said in unison and then laughed. I knew that the next knock on the door they got would not be coming from us. Old Man Chiltern knew it too. Maybe he even understood the real reason why we had come. As he saw us out, he said, ‘I am grateful lads, for everything.’

Or maybe that is just my imagination. ‘Good night, citizen,’ I said.

‘That could have gone better,’ said Anton as we stood beneath the flickering gaslight in the corridor again.

‘No it couldn’t have,’ I said. ‘It went just fine.’

‘You have a plan?’

‘Go home, pack your stuff,’ I said. ‘Tomorrow we go to the recruiting office.’

He let out a long whoop. He looked as pleased as if I had told him we were off for a night at the penny theatre followed by a session at Mama Kraven’s Kathouse. Anton raced off delighted, without even saying goodnight.

I made my way back to our own apartment. I had a suspicion that things were not going to work out quite that smoothly. They never did in the Forgemarket.

My father was not in when I got home. Doubtless he was out on a spree. It was his usual response to a crisis. In a way it made me sad – I was not going to get a chance to say goodbye before I left forever. He was my one piece of blood kin and whatever else he was, he was my father. In a way, I was glad too, for it made what I was going to do easier. I found the hidden key taped to the underside of the chair. I went over to the loose block of plascrete in the floor and levered it up. Much to my relief the box was where my father had left it. I opened it with the key and took out the contents, which were wrapped in protective oilcloth.

I unwrapped it slowly and carefully just as I had seen him do when I was a little boy and he thought I was asleep. It was an old laspistol, the weapon my father had carried in his gang-boy youth. The metal felt heavy and cold as death in my hand. My fingers closed on the grip and I raised it to eye-level and sighted along it, just as you see small boys do when they are playing orks and Guardsmen in the street. The difference was that I held a real gun in my hand for the first time in my life. It made me feel strong yet at the same time vulnerable and crazy. I had this odd feeling like I could not

trust myself with it, that I might do something mad, like those killers who go on murder sprees in the Underhive warrens.

Just feeling the trigger under my finger made my heart beat faster and my breathing shallow. I could imagine getting Little Tobey or the pock-faced leg-breaker in my sights and burning them down where they stood.

I laughed softly. The gun was old and I did not even know if it would work. I hit the small circular button near my thumb. The weapon vibrated slightly. An indicator on the back of the handle blinked green, indicating the power cell still held a charge. I knew all that from reading prop-novs, just as I knew what to do next. If it seems unusual to you that an untrained boy could get a gun to work so easily, just remember, those weapons were designed to be used by unlettered farm boys and the dregs of the Imperium's slums, or so a tech-priest once told me.

I ran my thumb over the power dial, moving it to the lowest setting. The roach was back. I took aim at it and pulled the trigger. I missed but the low intensity beam illuminated the room and scorched the piping. I moved it after the roach as it scuttled to escape death. The beam hit it and it burned, carapace exploding as its innards super-heated.

So the gun worked. I switched it off and put it inside my coat. I put the box back in its usual place and placed the plascrete block back on top of it. I did not want my father stumbling over it if he came back drunk.

As it turned out there was no need to worry. He did not come back that night. Somehow, I managed to get some fitful sleep on the cold floor. When I woke it was dawn, time to be up and going. I packed my stuff and paused at the door to take one last look at the apartment. I suppose I knew I was never going to see it again. It was a strange feeling. I had lived all of my life up till that point in this one small cramped room and I did not like the idea of leaving my father without any idea of where I had gone. I did not know what to do. I had neither paper nor stylus to leave a message.

I stood for a second undecided, lasgun weighing down my coat, half-empty duffel bag hanging from the other, then I knew what I had to do. I raised the weapon and burned my farewell onto the wall then I put the gun into my coat's deep pocket. I stepped through the door and locked it behind me and walked out into the corridor, certain I would never return.

Anton and Ivan were in the vestibule of the tenement. They too had half-

empty kitbags. In the wan gas light there was something waxen about their faces and odd in their expressions. They did not look quite real. They looked nervous and very young.

‘We are really going to do this?’ Ivan said.

‘Yes,’ I said.

Anton let out a long whoop. We stepped through the doors. The big groundcar was there, and Little Tobey and a dozen of his bruisers. This time the two men Ivan had hit were with them. I felt like I had been punched in the stomach but I kept a smile plastered on my face.

‘Good morning, boys,’ Little Tobey said. ‘It saddens me that you were not cleverer about this, it really does.’

He snapped his fingers. A wave of big men came towards us. I could see they were wearing knuckle-dusters and carrying claw hammers. They moved as if they did not expect any resistance.

Feeling calmer than I ever had done in my life, I pulled my father’s laspistol from my pocket and swept the barrel over the line of them. They stopped and stood frozen as if I had waved a magic wand. Beside me I heard Anton gasp.

The pock-faced man that had started all this said, ‘You don’t know how to use that thing. And even if you did, you don’t have the nads to use it.’

I pulled the trigger. The beam glanced the edge of his arm. His overcoat caught fire and he rolled screaming in the snow, trying to put it out.

‘I think you’ll find I do,’ I said. I pointed the weapon straight at Little Tobey, who was reaching inside his coat. ‘Careful,’ I said.

Ivan strode forward, reached inside the coat and pulled out a gun. ‘I don’t know what exactly you boys think you’re doing but you’re signing your own death warrants,’ Tobey said.

‘It’s good that you are so concerned,’ I said. ‘But don’t worry about us. Worry about yourself. Get in the car.’

Ivan held the door open and he and Tobey got in. Anton and I joined them. It was a limo. Inside, it felt like there was enough space to hold a party. ‘Tell your driver to take us to the recruiting office,’ I said.

Tobey did as he was told and the groundcar pulled smoothly away. Behind Tobey’s head I watched the streets of the Forgemarket scroll by. It felt different. Inside the groundcar it was silent and we were as separate from the crowds going to work as if we were already aboard a spacecraft.

Anton looked pale. Ivan looked as if he might have been carved from stone. Little Tobey looked as relaxed as if he did not have a gun pointed at him. The whole time I kept waiting for him to try something. He probably could have, too.

I do not know how long it took us to drive to Imperial Plaza but we got there eventually. The groundcar pulled up in front of an enormous marbled tower. The Imperial eagle spread its wings over the gigantic entrance. Ivan opened the door and got out. We followed. Little Tobey rolled down the window and watched us go. His face was bleak for a moment then he smiled and said, ‘Good luck, boys… and don’t come back.’

We walked up the stairs and through the great doors of the recruitment office. As they swung shut behind us, I thought about the message I had left for my father burned into the walls of our apartment like the inscription etched on the head of a tombstone.

All it said was: *Gone for a soldier.*

OceanofPDF.com

ANGEL OF FIRE

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

Exhibit 107D-5H. Transcription from a speech imprint found in the rubble of Bunker 207, Hamel's Tower, Kaladon, containing information pertaining to the proposed Canonisation of Lord High Commander Solar Macharius and to the investigation of former High Inquisitor Hyronimus Drake for heresy and treason against the Imperium.

Walk in the Emperor's Light.

When the ork kicked in the door I knew I was dead.

Half again as tall as a man, with a huge chainsword gripped in one massive gnarled fist, the greenskin surveyed the barracks room with eyes the colour of blood. It threw back its ugly head, opened its tusked mouth wide and emitted a bellow of rage loud enough to wake the dead. It grunted something in its brutish language as if it expected us to obey. We would not have, of course, even if we understood it. We were Imperial Guard, soldiers of the Emperor, and orks have always been numbered among His enemies.

The greenskin should not have been so far inside the bunker. That fact alone told me at least a company of men were already dead. Hell, our whole army out there in the Hamel's Tower trench system might be dead for all I knew. We had not heard anything from command in days.

Before I could give any orders, the xenos sprang into the room. Its chainsword flickered, taking off Bohuslav's arm at the shoulder then removing the top of Alaine's head, sending brain and blood and bone splattering across the chamber. Behind me I heard seats clattering to the ground and tables being overturned and the confused grunts of grey-uniformed men rising from their metal bunks to confront this sudden horror,

the last thing they would expect to meet so deep within the fortified complex.

The ork took two more steps that almost put it within cutting distance of me. I brought up the shotgun and I pulled the trigger. It didn't fail me. It never has in thirty years of service. The few brains the ork possessed sprayed against the wall. The headless body toppled over, limbs still twitching, the chainsword still roaring and starting to slither across the bloody floor till it came to a stop, the teeth grinding against the metal leg of a bunk.

More orks raced down the plascrete stairs into this chamber, chanting their bestial battle cries. Some of them shot their guns into the air with wild enthusiasm. Others waved outsized, crudely serrated blades and axes, roaring with obscene joy in the knowledge they would get to use them soon.

I pulled the trigger of the shotgun again and sent the leading ork toppling backwards into its brethren. That slowed them down enough for me to ready a grenade and lob it into their midst. I dived, putting myself behind an overturned mess table as the wave of concussion rippled through the chamber. I looked at the rest of my squad. They were mostly just raw recruits, little older than I had been when I joined the Imperial Guard. This was what the proud legions that had followed Macharius across the galaxy had been reduced to. It was a sad thought.

I shouted at them to get ready. It was pointless telling them to fix bayonets – there was no way this sorry lot would survive any sort of close combat encounter with orks. The ones with any gumption were already doing so anyway. The rest were fumbling with their guns. One or two were struggling to put on their helmets and rebreathers. Andropov was trying to put his boots back on.

'Get those bloody lasguns ready!' I shouted as I stood up. I made sure my shotgun was pointing in their direction. 'At least die on your feet like men. Hell! Shoot well enough, you might not even die today at all!'

Most of the Guardsmen raised their weapons as if they at least knew what they were supposed to do with them. One or two of them looked completely stunned. It was probably the first time they'd ever got this close to an ork, which is not something calculated to reassure even the bravest. If they did not start doing something soon it would almost certainly be the last.

'You're supposed to be soldiers of the Emperor,' I bellowed. There might

even have been some foam flecking the corners of my lips. They were starting to look scared of me now, which was good; better of me than the orks. ‘Shoot the bastards!’

One of the greenskins was still alive even though one of its arms was only holding on by a thin thread of flesh – bloody hard things to kill, orks. It reared up onto its legs and roared something in a language that none of us would ever understand. I aimed the shotgun at it again and pulled the trigger. The blast hit it full in the chest and toppled it backwards. I stepped forwards and brought my size twelve Imperial Guard issue hob-nailed boot down on the fingers of its good hand, snapping them, then I hit its skull with the butt of the shotgun. You’d think I’d have known better by now. It bounced off the thick bony ridges. Hell, it barely broke the leathery green skin.

I stepped back and put another shot into it point-blank. I could hear more orks chanting on the stairs and I knew that the second wave would be arriving soon. I glanced back at the youngsters who looked to me for leadership and shouted at them again. It was an odd place to make a last stand, a grey-walled plascrete dormitory, bunks lining two walls, lockers lining others, a few metal tables and chairs scattered in the centre. Propaganda posters glaring down from any free space.

‘They’re coming! Get bloody ready!’ I strode back over to them, putting myself out of the line of fire. I did not want to get cut down by a hail of lasgun bolts. It looked like we were about to make a heroic last stand down here in the guts of this half-finished bunker in a half-complete fortress on a backwater planet. I had come a bloody long way to die.

The orks raced in through the door. It was a choke point where they died in a hail of las-bolts, flesh sizzling and blackening as they fell. It did not stop the ones behind. It never does. They forced their way through, pushing wounded aside, trampling on the fallen, desperate to get to grips with us.

‘Keep firing,’ I roared, loud as any ork. If the greenskins got to grips with these lads it would be all over for us. ‘You stop and I’ll stick this shotgun up your arse and pull the trigger myself!’

They kept shooting but the orks kept coming, covering the distance faster than you would believe of creatures so big and awkward-looking. I found myself ducking the power axe of a monster almost the size of an ogryn, backing away as fast as I could. It took another swipe at me. I felt a wall

against my spine and knew I could retreat no further. The axe passed so close I could feel the vibration its blades left in the air. I ducked down beneath the arc of the swing and brought the shotgun butt forwards, aiming for the knee. More by luck than judgement I hit. The ork grunted and fell, kneecap shattered. It still held on to the axe though and tried to hit me with it. I stepped away and shot again. The force of the blast took the creature to the ground.

I glanced around. It was not going well. The orks had got to grips with my lads, and were tearing through them like a chainsword through a gangrenous leg. I pumped the shotgun and put down another ork but that just got the attention of the remainder.

The distraction seemed to do something though. One or two of the boys with fitted bayonets tore into the orks with the desperate fury of men who know they are going to die anyway and want to drag something down into the grave with them.

One ork got stabbed five or six times before it realised what was happening. It bellowed in rage and fury before it fell to be stamped and trampled on. A few more orks poured into the room, slithering and tripping on the corpses and entrails of their kin. I noticed, and not for the first time, that ork blood was greenish and smelled like mushroom steaks back on Belial. I lobbed another grenade into the doorway, just to keep them busy. It took down another group of them.

The room seethed with violence. It was complete chaos with no way to tell what was going on. Smoke filled the air, and the smell of chemical explosive and ripped flesh. Las-bolts winked in the gloom. The air seemed to vibrate with the bull-bellow of orks and the roar of their chain-bladed axes. A head rolled along the floor towards me trailing droplets of blood. Andropov would not be struggling with his boots any more.

I strode forwards, shouting, ‘Rally to me, men of the Seventh!’ An ork stood in front of me. I smashed it in the mouth with the butt of the shotgun. It spat teeth and made to bring its weapon to bear. Two men leapt on it, clubbing and stabbing. It went down, a huge hand clutching one man’s neck and snapping it. It thrashed around and I noticed the combat knife sticking out of its neck. It kept moving, wrestling with another of my men. I moved around it, unable to shoot without hitting Rostoky. Suddenly it reared up, throwing him to one side as casually as I might have thrown a rucksack. It

gave me a clean shot. The shotgun roared. It went down again.

Suddenly, in one of those strange turnarounds you get in battle, I realised there were only a few orks left standing. No more of the greenskins were flooding into the room. There had not been so many of them as fear had made it seem. I knew then that we might actually be able to beat the bastards, if we were quick and held our nerve. Of course, no one had told the orks that. They fought on as if determined to kill and eat the lot of us, and as if we had no say in the matter.

'Stand your ground, you dozy bastards!' I yelled. 'There's only three of them.'

In point of fact there were five but why make the odds any bigger than I needed to. 'You're killing them.'

It gave the lads heart. Las-bolts flickered all around and took down another ork. A group of Guardsmen dog-piled onto one of the remaining greenskins and practically carved it to pieces. Suddenly there really were only three. I reduced the number to two with a quick blast from the shotgun.

The orks stood their ground though, roaring and lashing out with their blades. One of them took out some sort of autogun and snapped off a shot in my direction. I only avoided it by throwing myself flat. When I looked up again, I saw it had taken a bayonet through the neck. I launched myself at it, smashing it in the stomach with the barrel of the shotgun and then bringing the butt into contact with the hinge of its jaw, breaking it. A few heartbeats later it was dragged to the ground and finished by our boys. In another few seconds the fight was over and much to my surprise we had won.

'Well done, lads,' I said. 'That's how orks die!'

Afterwards we counted the cost. It seemed of the original twenty men who had been with me, more than half were dead and several of those who were left were dying. We patched the wounds of those that we could and the rest we covered with whatever sheets or sacking were available. Most of the time it was with blankets taken from the packs of the dead men themselves. The worst of it was sitting with those who were so badly hurt that they were almost gone.

'Is it true that you were once with Macharius?' Davis asked. His voice was weak and his brow was feverish. His skin had the unnatural greyish pallor of a man who has lost too much blood. 'Is it true, sergeant?'

He was from Dannerheim, one of the worlds that joined Macharius late in his great Reconquest. I suppose you could say that we conquered it although actually what we really did was bring it back into the Light of the Emperor of Mankind.

I was just sitting with him waiting for him to go, a duty I have performed many times and on many worlds with many soldiers, some of whom were my friends. I could see that he was looking up at the campaign badges on my tunic. They were all there – Teradon and Karsk IV and Lucifer and all those other places that we had followed the Lord High Commander through. I had a badge for all of them. I wish sometimes that I had back the blood and flesh I'd left on their surfaces. He reached out and grabbed my hand. He pressed it so tight that I thought perhaps he was gone but he looked up at me with feverish eyes and said, 'Is it true?'

I don't know why it was so important to him. Perhaps he just wanted to know that he was dying for something, that he was playing some part in the epic of Imperial history. Maybe at that moment in time he saw me as a link to that Great Crusade across the stars that Macharius had led. Maybe he was just in pain and wanted something to distract him through those last few seconds before everything went dark and he walked into the Light of the Emperor or whatever waits for us beyond death.

'Yes, son, it's true,' I said. 'I was with him on Karsk IV and I was with him on Demetrius and I was with him in a dozen different places.'

'Was he what they said he was? Was he a saint? Was he the chosen of the Light?'

I laughed. It was either that or cry. He looked up at me with such pain in his eyes that I stopped.

'Why did you laugh?' There was an intense edge to his voice now and I could tell that he was close to passing.

'No,' I said. 'He was not a saint. He was a man – a very great man and in some ways a very wicked one.'

His face twisted. I could tell that this was not what he wanted to hear. But what else was I going to say? It was the truth, and one of those things that Macharius always demanded was that we speak the truth to him and of him. Of course, like every other man, he often did not want to hear that truth when it was spoken but one of the things that made him what he was was the fact that he asked that it be done at all.

The boy looked disappointed and I cannot really blame him for that, because I was denying him his last wish, an affirmation of his belief in saints. Once they may have walked the world, once they may have stood by the side of the Emperor, perhaps out there in the darkness between the stars some of them still exist. The universe is vast and contains many strange things and I have not seen everything.

All I know is that Macharius was not a saint. He was perhaps the greatest general since the time of the Emperor. He was capable of great kindness and great wickedness but what man is not, given the opportunity? And opportunity was a thing that Macharius had a lot of.

I looked down at the boy, but his eyes were wide open and he was staring at the ceiling with that unblinking look that told me that he would not be closing them again himself. I reached out with my left hand and shut his eyes for him. I looked around at that chamber, full of the dead and dying, and I thought about Macharius, and about all of the others who had followed him and his great strange crusade to the edge of the known universe.

I thought about the Lord High Commander and I thought about Ivan and Anton and Anna. I thought about people I have not seen alive in three decades – I thought about Tiny and the lieutenant and the Undertaker. I thought about the fact that I had almost died today and that sometime soon I was certainly going to, and I decided that I needed to get it all down. I needed to leave what I knew so that someday it might be remembered: the truth about Macharius and Drake and their holy war to reclaim the galaxy, the truth about what they were like and how they died.

So here I am with this data-slate, making this recording. At least, it's something to fill the time until the orks come again.

For me it all started on Karsk IV. This is how it was…

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ONE

From the top of Flamestrike Ridge I could see all the way into hellOn the horizon, chemical flames erupted from newly born volcanoes. The molten rock of the lava lakes churned around islands of accumulated ash. Big, leather-winged predators drifted on thermals above the infernal pools. They might have been birds or bats or some mutant harpy out of ancient legend. It was too far to make out the full, ominous details.

Even at a distance of several Gothic leagues I could smell the brimstone on the wind. It made me cough and left a sulphurous taste on my tongue, adding its own special tang to the already acrid air of Karsk IV.

Off to the south, along the ridge-line, a battery of Basilisks pointed their pitted gun-metal snouts at the sky. Their crews had set them up according to the proper rituals and were traversing their weapons through ninety-degree arcs. I half expected them to start lobbing shells at the bubbling tar pits to test their accuracy.

‘I don’t think we’ll be going that way,’ said Anton, squinting in the direction of the flames. He leaned against a massive orange boulder at the same angle he had propped his lasgun. He had lost weight and looked taller and skinnier than ever. His grey uniform hung loose on his body. Huge sweat circles stained his plain dress tunic under the armpits. His rebreather dangled around his neck. His helmet was tipped back, showing the scar he had picked up on Charybdis. It had been sutured badly and the remnants of the scabbing puckered the flesh in small ridges so that it looked like a

centipede crawling across his forehead just beneath the skin. Anton had acquired many interesting scars in his career as a soldier of the Emperor, some of them in his mind.

‘Really,’ I said.

I wiped the sweat from my brow as I watched an enormous geyser of lava spurt skywards. Huge gobbets of burning brimstone dropped back to splatter the ground. It was a sight at once awesome and extremely discouraging if you knew this was an obstacle between you and your objective. Soon we were going to have to find our way through that mass of flame and magma. ‘What makes you think that?’

‘The tanks will sink in the boiling rock and we will all drown.’

‘We’d burn to death before we drowned,’ said Ivan. His prosthetic jaw and the mass of plasteel covering half his ruined face distorted his voice into something not quite human. It was a legacy of an ork cannon shell on Jurasik. He raised the magnoculars he had taken from the dead Schismatic colonel and squinted in the direction of the flames. He still had the broad build of the boxer he had been during our time in the guild factorum on Belial. Amid the sweltering heat he was the only one of us not soaked in sweat. I envied him that. ‘The molten rock is called lava and we will be going that way. There are paths through it. You would know that if you paid any attention during His Lordship’s briefings.’

Anton grinned his idiot grin. He had the rotten yellow teeth so common among the hive workers of Belial. ‘Why would I do that when I got you to do it for me?’

‘Because I may not always be here to haul your skinny arse out of harm’s way.’ Ivan rubbed at the bare patch on his upper arm where his stripes had been. He had suffered one of the drunken demotions that were as regular as his promotions. It took a lot of alcohol to kill the pain and smite the recurring infections the reconstructive tech-surgery on his face had left him with.

I could tell from the expression in his cold blue eyes that death was on his mind. It had been on all of our minds since Henrik’s name came up in the lasgun lottery. I still looked around half-expecting to see old Henrik standing there, cracking jokes and offering up his hip flask. We had buried him in a mudhole on Charybdis six standard months ago.

Death was something you always thought about at the start of a campaign

and this one was likely to be the biggest and most dangerous any of us would ever see, a full-scale Imperial Crusade, the first in a score of generations. Even Anton looked thoughtful. He pulled at his lower lip with a greasy finger. His frown made the centipede scar wriggle on his brow.

'You're very quiet, Leo,' Ivan said, looking over at me. 'Thinking too much again?'

'I have to think for two when Anton is around,' I said.

'Ha bloody ha!' Anton said.

'For you that was a rejoinder of unusual wit,' I said.

'You swallow a lexicon?' Anton asked. 'You always have to use big words to prove you are not stupid. Or are you just trying to sound like the lieutenant and his toadies? You spend enough time around them up in the cockpit.'

'I am not the man who joined the Imperial Guard because he thought he could get promoted to Space Marine,' I said. Ivan snorted.

'You thought so too,' Anton said. He had stopped tugging his lip and was probing the insides of his ear with the same finger. 'You just deny it now.' His tone was that of the aggrieved child part of him was always going to be.

Maybe he was right. Maybe we had believed that back on Belial, when all we knew of soldiering was what we read in propaganda novels written at the behest of the planetary government.

Was it possible we had been so naive? Well, whatever naivety had been in us had been burned out by ten years of constant warfare on a dozen worlds.

'I think I can see one of the paths the lieutenant was talking about,' Ivan said. When he turned his head, I could see the flames reflected in the lenses of his field glasses and the metal of his cheek. It gave him a daemonic look, like a premonition of dark things to come. 'I think we might be able to pass through and take the heretics in the flank.'

'It would have made more sense to drop in on top of them,' Anton said.

'Yeah, nothing like dropping on top of the planetary defence batteries for keeping casualties low,' I said. 'It's a good job General Sejanus is in charge and not you…'

'Space Marines make drops like that,' Anton said. He sounded wistful. 'Just once I would like to do the same. Or at least bloody well get to see one.'

Ivan laughed. 'We're just the poor, bloody Guard. We get to do most of the

fighting and watch others show up late and take the credit.'

'If we're lucky,' I said. The words came out more bitter than I intended but we all knew I was speaking true. If we were lucky we would be alive to watch others take the credit. Plenty would not be. Henrik's death had left me thinking all three of us had lived longer than we had any reasonable right to expect. It was only a matter of time before our names were bellowed out at the Last Roll Call. The odds against us got longer every day we kept breathing.

Such were the joys of being one of the Emperor's soldiers in the bright new dawn of the 41st millennium. It was probably ever so.

We walked back down the hill to a camp seething with activity. Tens of thousands of grey-tunicked soldiers swarmed over the dry rock of Karsk IV. Hundreds of enginseer crews crawled over our Baneblades and Shadowswords and Leman Russ, scoping the armour plate, repairing the track mechanisms, testing the rotation of the turrets, elevating their guns, intoning battle hymns to placate the angry spirits of the great war machines. The roar of engines, the hum of servo-mechanisms and the chant of technical plainsong filled the air. The smell of drive exhaust rivalled the tang of the planetary atmosphere. The air vibrated from the engine-thunder of the enormous vehicles. Until you've witnessed it, you can never really appreciate exactly how much work and how much noise goes into getting an Imperial Guard army ready to move.

Over everything loomed the monstrous bulk of the landing ships on which we had dropped from the eternal dark of space. They were larger than ork gargants and down their belly ramps rumbled Leman Russ after Leman Russ. Company after company of soldiers exited through the external hatches. The Imperial Guard had arrived in force at this tiny outpost in the desert of Karsk IV. It was all part of some great plan which, as usual, no one had bothered to explain to us. An adjutant might just have stuck the pin in the wrong part of the map again for all we knew.

There was that air of subdued excitement and suppressed fear that you always get at the start of campaigns. It was combined with the simple pleasure of having real planetary dirt beneath our feet and real gravity tugging at our bodies. When you've been cooped up on an Imperial troopship for months, you cannot wait to see a sky again even if it belongs

to a foreign world where you may well die.

We passed along a row of Chimeras. Their crews lay around on their packs and blankets checking their lasguns and their filter masks. Ivan exchanged nods with the men he knew. There were far fewer familiar faces now than there had been when we set out from Belial all those years ago.

I thought about how different my surroundings were from that industrial world half a sector away. Belial was a cold place, much colder than this one and much more densely populated. There had been vast wastelands between the hive cities there too, of course. On Belial they had been slag heaps and ash deserts, the products of thousands of years of industrial production in the service of the Imperium.

Here, the wastelands were the result of shifting tectonic plates and the action of enormous volcanoes. This produced pyrite, the source of the planet's wealth and the real reason why Battlegroup Sejanus of the Second Macharian Army was on-planet. This world would provide us with the shells that would feed our tanks, guns across the surface of hundreds of worlds as the crusade of Macharius got into gear. We needed to control this planet if the holy war was to proceed.

Apparently, Karsk IV's rebel governor had different ideas. In the long years of schism that preceded the start of the 41st millennium his family had become a power unto itself. They controlled all the industrial worlds of this multi-planet system. The governor no longer saw himself as the Emperor's representative. He believed himself to be absolute ruler of everything he surveyed. He claimed he was descended from the Emperor himself and blessed by the Angel of Fire who stood guard at the Emperor's right hand. It was up to us to convince him otherwise. He needed to learn that the Imperium had returned in all its glory. The bad old days were over. The stability of the Emperor's rule was being extended into this sector once more.

We were the spearhead of an army of millions dispatched to reclaim thousands of worlds long lost to the light of the Emperor's presence. Under the Lord High Commander Macharius we had crossed the infinite depths of space to bring the Emperor's word to the lost and the forsaken.

We walked along a long line of Leman Russ stuck with their engines revving and going nowhere. Crewmen thrust their heads out of turrets and looked around. A few shouted to the troop carriers ahead of them asking

what the hold-up was. If they had really wanted to know, they would have used the comm-net. The three of us were making better time on our own booted feet than the whole armoured column.

We soon saw the cause of the problem. One of the tanks was bogged down in a dust pool, holding up the whole line. A team of enginseers and their massive mechanical drones were laying a metal plate in front of the Russ, hoping that its tracks would get traction on it. Another team were attaching chains to the tow hook extruded by the tank in front so that it could help pull the trapped vehicle clear. We quickened our pace so we wouldn't get roped into the work crew. Ahead of us was a huge flat plain covered in thousands of blister tents. In the cleared areas between the sleeping zones, companies marched and drilled and dug latrines. The Imperial Guard likes to keep its soldiers busy.

'Look at them,' Anton said, taking in a company of new recruits with one bold sweep of his thin right arm. 'They should still be in schola.'

Their officer glared at Anton as he went by but said nothing, probably because in his heart of hearts he agreed. Maybe he noticed the campaign badges on our chests. We had more than he did.

There were a lot of new faces in the crowd, replacements right out of the training battalions for the casualties we had taken on Charybdis. They had the fresh-faced look that I knew only too well. I had worn it myself not all that long ago in the great scheme of things.

Ivan made the low whistling sound he sometimes used to signify amusement. The prosthetics made it hard for him to laugh. 'Are you going to teach them?'

It was not just the youngsters' faces that seemed clear and clean-scrubbed. Their uniforms had a newness to them that was dazzling. Their lasguns gleamed with the oil-gel coating they had when the Temple factorums shipped them. The newcomers were sharp-edged, bright and clear and not quite real yet. Some of them would not live to get that way. I already knew that. I had seen all of that before.

'It would hardly be worth my while,' Anton said. 'Let's wait a few months and see who survives and then we'll decide who gets taught.'

It was a cruel thing to say but we nodded agreement. We would help these newcomers where we could and do our best to keep them alive because doing that would help keep us alive, but we would not get close to them

until we saw who lived and who died.

That was always difficult to tell. The confident assured ones, the ones you would have sworn to the Emperor knew what they were doing were often the first to catch a las-bolt. The idiots, the incompetents, the sloppy ones sometimes surprised you and turned out to be good soldiers.

I mean who would have guessed looking at Anton back in the day that he was ever going to live through ten years of hellish violence. I suppose you could have said the same about me. Remembering what we had been like back then, Ivan was the only one I would put money on and look what had happened to him.

We walked all the way back to the *Indomitable*. Fondly I looked at the incept number ten inscribed on its side beneath the Imperial Gothic lettering of its name. For a good deal of my career as an Imperial soldier this ancient tank had been my guardian and my weapon. It loomed over us like a mountain of ceramite and plasteel. The Baneblade cast a long cold shadow, even on the warm surface of Karsk IV. Its fierce presence welcomed us back to the only real home we had known in nearly a decade.

‘Morning, ladies! Have a nice stroll?’ Corporal Hesse’s booming voice called down from the dorsal turret. He was stripped to the waist and the cog-wheel tattoos were visible on his straining gut.

‘Piss off,’ Anton replied.

‘I think you meant to say piss off *corporal*, Private Antoniev,’ Hesse replied cheerfully. He muttered something to somebody below him in the fuselage of the tank. Whoever it was handed a power-spanner up to him and he began tightening nuts on the hatch-cover hinge. The effort made his chubby face red. Sweat dripped from his cheeks onto the metal as he spoke the proper invocations. Hesse could always find something that needed work on round the vehicle. It was his pride and joy. Anything not so technical it needed to be handled by an enginseer was his particular pleasure to tinker with.

‘Yeah, piss off corporal, Private Antoniev,’ Anton said.

Hesse chuckled. ‘Only you could tell yourself to piss off when trying to come up with a witty retort, Antoniev. Anyway, break time is over. Get your tools out and put them to some use. And I don’t mean take a piss…’

‘Ha bloody ha,’ said Anton.

‘You’ve used that one already today,’ said Ivan. ‘You’ll wear it out.’

‘Ha bloody ha.’ Anton’s scarecrow figure was already halfway up the metal ladder in the Baneblade’s side. He reached the dorsal turret and threw himself flat beside Hesse, inspecting the servos of the rotator mechanism. Soon they were cheerfully discussing the lack of pressure in the hydraulics. Say what you like about Anton, when it came to machines he knew his stuff. It had been the same back in the factorum on Belial. Of course, if any real work needed done they would need to summon the tech-priests. The priests of that mechanical brotherhood were as jealous of their prerogatives as the Mechanics of the Factorum Guild back on Belial.

I climbed up a metal cliff and dropped into the Baneblade’s innards. It smelled of oil and plasteel and recycled air. But at least it was cooler than outside. I fell into a tanker’s stoop and scuttled along the corridor heading for the cockpit. I was surprised to find a stranger there checking the controls. He had the well-scrubbed appearance of the new intake. He fidgeted nervously, fingers drumming on the control altar. He looked like he was contemplating a particularly difficult mathematical problem. There was an abstracted, scholarly air to him.

‘That’s my chair,’ I said. He looked up, startled.

‘Sorry,’ he said, rising up so fast he banged his head on the ceiling where it sloped above the driver’s chair. I winced with sympathy. I’ve been known to do the same thing myself. He was a tall kid, a little taller than me. His hair was curly and dirty-blond. His eyes were a pale, pale blue. He smiled nervously, showing surprisingly good teeth.

I slumped down into my bucket seat and inspected the controls. It did not look like he had made any invocations, but it’s always a good idea to check. One of our Russ went off a cliff once because a new boy had set the drives into reverse and the driver was too drunk on coolant fluid to check. Or so the story goes.

The boy stuck out a clean hand, with well-manicured nails. ‘Matosek,’ he said. ‘Adrian Adrianovitch Matosek.’

I looked at his hand till it withdrew. ‘Sit down, New Boy,’ I said. ‘And don’t touch anything until I say you can.’

I muttered the first driver’s prayer, pulled the periscope down into position and locked it. I twisted my driver’s cap sideways so the brim would not hit the eyepiece. Looking through it I got a clear view of the tortured sky above

us, and another look at the lava sea on the horizon. I adjusted the view angle until I saw the slope around us and all the other tanks and artillery lined up there, getting ready to move.

I closed my eyes, asked the blessing of the machine-spirits and sent my hands dancing across the control altar in the ritual gestures of invocation and control. The spirit of the great war engine was still quiescent.

I watched the needles on the volt gauges rise and fall in response to my devotions. I touched the engine pedals with my feet and heard the big drives roar. I checked the lock toggles on the control sticks to make sure they were still in place then invoked the Baneblade's tutelary spirit to watch over them.

'I never touched anything,' New Boy said. 'I know the rituals.'

'Don't say anything till I finish either,' I said. He fell into a silence, half-sullen and half-scared. I suppressed a smile. I knew what it was like to sit in that particular chair. Old Grigor had done exactly the same thing to me when I first saw the inside of a Baneblade. Well, he would learn by watching and doing, the same as I had to, the basic apprenticeship of the Imperial tank man.

I kept talking, 'There's been some shonky repairs done on Number Ten's port-side armour towards the rear. You need to cover for that where you can. Set her down with the starboard towards the enemy where you can and the gunners will traverse the turrets to compensate. Be that way till we can get proper repairs done. The requisition chit is in – has been since Charybdis. Any decade now we will get the parts.'

He nodded again and kept his mouth shut. He was doing all right so far. 'The number two drive has a tendency to over-rev at low speeds. You need to placate the spirit when it happens. It can be temperamental. Remember that.'

'Sure.'

'That's that then. Let's see if you can perform the basic rituals then.'

He shrugged. He looked at his control board. It was more or less a duplicate of mine. Hardly surprising really. Redundant controls systems are a feature of the Mark V Baneblade originated on Callan's Forge. They say that it's different on the Martian-sourced models but I would not know. I have never been inside one.

Nothing happened when he moved the switches. Nothing would unless the

cut-outs on my controls kicked in which would most likely mean I was dead or so wounded I did not care. Or I toggled the switch and asked the machine to hand over control. I watched him. He was a good kid, careful. Everything went back into neutral when he had finished with it. Even though he was not directly communing with the spirit of the vessel he was taking no chances.

‘What happened to him?’

‘Who?’ I asked although I already knew who he meant. Vehicles like this you were usually sitting in some dead man’s chair.

‘The one who sat here before me.’

‘He died,’ I said. ‘It’s an occupational hazard.’

‘I see you two have met,’ said a voice behind us. It had the relaxed, born-to-command tone of the Upper Hives. I turned to look at the lieutenant. He was a big man with a bleak-looking face and a shadow of stubble on his massive jaw he could never quite get rid of. His uniform was covered in braid. His eagle epaulettes were enormously ornate. Campaign medals festooned his broad chest. I have always suspected our officers’ elaborate uniforms were designed as a deliberate contrast to the plain tunics of the common soldier in our regiment. It emphasises the class difference and our rulers on Belial have always liked to do that.

Behind the lieutenant was the Understudy, a moon orbiting the lieutenant’s planetary presence, hoping to reflect some of his authority. His uniform braiding was scarcely less elaborate than the lieutenant’s. The Understudy did not look much older than the New Boy. He was trying to appear relaxed the way the lieutenant did. Maybe in another twenty years he would have mastered the trick but somehow I doubted it. The lieutenant had been born the way he was. Or perhaps decanted from a glass jar, the way some of the Schismatics had been.

‘Yes, sir,’ I said. I did not quite get the words out of my mouth as fast as New Boy. He still had the discipline and the eagerness to please of the training camps on him.

‘Very good,’ the lieutenant said. ‘Private Lemuel, I expect you to look out for Private Matosek. Show him the ropes, make sure he doesn’t reverse us into a lava field, that sort of thing.’

‘He’s already started, sir,’ said New Boy, not realising that it was

unnecessary. It was just the sort of thing the lieutenant felt called on to say for the good of morale, mostly his own.

‘I would have expected nothing less,’ said the lieutenant in his most inspirational manner. In spite of myself, I was pleased.

The lieutenant lounged back in his commander’s chair and invoked the controls. The command consoles emerged from the floor of the hull and locked into place around him as the spirit of the ancient tank responded to his prayers. The Understudy moved to a position two paces behind the throne and studied the screens as if his life depended on it. Maybe one day it would. The lieutenant studied the holo-images.

‘I don’t like the pressurisation on turret two,’ the lieutenant said in the quiet murmur the upper classes always use to let you know that you should not be listening but even if you are, it does not really matter any way.

‘You’re right, sir,’ said the Understudy. His private school had most likely provided him with a certificate in obsequiousness and daily lessons in toadying. ‘Shall I have words with the repair crews, sir?’

‘Hesse is already looking at it with Antoniev,’ the lieutenant said. From his expression, you would have thought the Understudy imagined the lieutenant had uncovered this by some supernatural means instead of having issued orders for it this morning. ‘If anything needs to be done I will petition it through the proper channels and with the proper offerings.’

‘Very good, sir,’ the Understudy said.

‘Still, all things considered, I think we’re set right to carry the Emperor’s word to the heretics.’ The lieutenant sounded sincere when he said that. It was a gift of his. ‘What do you think, Private Lemuel?’

‘I think they’ll be sorry they ever saw us, sir,’ I said with the right amount of stupid enthusiasm and bloodthirsty malice. It was what the lieutenant expected from us Lower Hivers and who was I to disappoint him?

‘We’ll know soon enough,’ he said, taking his pipe from his pocket, stuffing it with lho weed and lighting it. I knew something big was coming. He puffed away for a few moments, like a Baneblade’s exhausts on a frosty morning on Belial. He looked unspeakably cheerful, the way he always did when he was about to break very good or very bad news. ‘We’d better put on a good show tomorrow.’

‘Why is that, sir?’ I asked. The Understudy glared at me. He had wanted to ask that question himself even though he had most likely already known the

answer.

‘Because we are under the eyes of the Lord High Commander Macharius himself.’

‘He’s here on Karsk IV, sir?’ I was as impressed as the lieutenant intended me to be. Macharius was the most successful general the Imperium had produced in a millennium, although you’ve got to remember this was before the campaigns that really made his name.

‘He soon will be,’ the lieutenant said. ‘His ship is in orbit.’

It seemed that Karsk IV was even more important than I had thought if Lord High Commander Macharius himself had come to supervise the opening of the campaign.

‘It’s possible there will be a surprise inspection tomorrow. Not a word of this to anybody,’ the lieutenant said, tapping the side of his nose. He might as well have winked. If he had not wanted me to spread the word among the crew he would never have said anything.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWO

‘So Macharius is really here?’ Anton said, studying his cards with the sort of concentration he normally reserved for his prop-nov. He sounded impressed. Everyone around the little counter in the Baneblade’s galley looked that way, even the engine-room boys who normally didn’t give a toss about anything.

I considered my hand. It was the usual rubbish that Anton always dealt me. It was such a regular event that if I had not known better I would have suspected him of being a card sharp.

‘Apparently so,’ I said.

‘It’s not the sort of thing the lieutenant is usually wrong about,’ Ivan said, raising a finger to indicate that Anton should deal him a new card. A low whistle emerged from the corner of his mouth. I wondered, as I always did, whether he knew he was doing that. He looked at it for a moment and discarded the Four of Cogs. He drummed his metal cheeks with his fingers. There was the faintest of echoes.

‘True.’ Oily rubbed his grease-stained fingers on the chest of his uniform. It was how he had got his nickname. He raised two fingers and Anton handed him two cards. A frown flickered across his face. ‘How do you do it, Anton? How do you always manage to give me exactly what I don’t need?’

He discarded the two cards. One was the Black Commissar; the other was the Tech-Priest. I winced. Those two cards might have given me a winning

hand in spite of Anton's skill at dealing trash.

'Why do you think he's here?' Anton asked. 'Macharius, I mean?'

'The lieutenant told me he wanted to check up on you,' I said. 'He heard you would make a good Space Marine.'

'Piss off,' Anton said.

Ivan gestured for another card and slotted it into his hand. He held all of his cards close to his chest. He looked at them for a moment, put them face down on the table and poured himself another glass of Oily's specially distilled coolant fluid, then unwrapped a ration bar and stuffed the whole thing into his mouth. He crunched it with his metal teeth as he frowned down at his cards.

New Boy entered the galley and looked at us. 'Playing Shonk?' he asked.

'No,' Anton replied. 'We're not.'

Oily looked up at him. 'Yes we are. Don't believe Anton. He lies.' There was nothing friendly in his tone. He was just annoying Anton.

'Can I play if a seat comes free?' New Boy asked.

'They never come free,' Anton said.

'It's another dead man's chair, is it?' New Boy asked. Silence settled on the game like a shroud. It was exactly the wrong thing to say and you could tell that Matosek suddenly appreciated that. He had spoken out of irritation and triggered more than he bargained for. Nobody looked at him. It was as if he wasn't there.

The game went on. Fingers were raised to indicate the number of cards people wanted. Glasses were filled from the coolant flask. Hands were tossed in as players folded. Eventually New Boy got the message and left. The air thawed perceptibly when he was gone.

'That boy has a lot to learn,' Oily said.

'He's all right,' I said. 'He's just nervous.'

'Let's hope he's not nervous when we meet the heretics,' Anton said. 'That could get us all killed.'

'You won't have to worry about that,' Ivan said. 'Macharius will have made you a Space Marine by then.'

'Ha bloody ha.'

Drums sounded. Bugles blared. We lined up outside our tanks, dressed in our parade best. The heat made us sweat but we stood still as statues. We'd

been standing that way for hours. We'd keep standing that way for as long as it took. It was a general inspection, and Lord High Commander Macharius himself was conducting it.

I swallowed. The ash in the air was making the back of my throat dry and tickly. I kept my mind deliberately blank for as long as I could and when I could not do that any more I let my thoughts wander where they would to memories of Belial and Charybdis and Excalibur and Patrocles. The back of my right arm itched but I could not scratch it. The combat shotgun it was my special privilege as a driver to carry felt heavy against my shoulder. I fought down the urge to fidget. That just made things worse.

Suddenly he was there, Macharius, flanked by his bodyguards and the colonel, the ranking commissar and the other high muckety-mucks and an orderly who carried his personal lion's head banner. He walked slowly along the line, looking the men in the eye, stopping for a word or two with some veteran, usually one decorated for valour or service. Within a couple of minutes he was close enough for me to see clearly.

Macharius was exactly what you expected an Imperial hero to look like. He was a big man, broad-shouldered, leonine. His hair was golden, his eyes were golden, his skin was golden. He moved with an easy grace. His uniform fitted him perfectly. Even then he was past what would have been middle age for a normal citizen but the juvenat treatments had taken perfectly. He looked no older than me. Hell, he looked younger and a lot fitter. He looked like you imagine the Emperor did when he walked amongst men; more than human.

When he spoke, he sounded the part as well. His voice was deep and perfectly modulated. There was an edge to it. It was the sort of voice you would expect a great predatory cat to have. His gaze settled on me as he passed. At first it was chilling. There was something cold about those golden eyes, something inhuman, but when he smiled, his face lit up and he seemed pleasant enough.

Beside him were others almost as intimidating, regimental officers, members of the High Command and others including Old Walrus Face, the colonel of the Seventh. One man in particular stood out. He radiated an air of cold authority noticeable even in the shadow of Macharius's dominating presence. He was a tall man with the long, pale, ascetic face of a priest. He wore heavy robes and a long cloak with the cowl down. This was Drake, as

I was later to learn and wish I had not. Even then I sensed he was not a man whose eye you wanted to catch. My instincts about such things have always been good.

Surrounding the party were others: half-man, half-machine, members of the Adeptus Mechanicus. They circled around constantly. One or two of them carried huge devices that might have been weapons. They had long copper-covered barrels and strange lenses glittered at their extremities. Similar things were mounted on huge tracked vehicles on the edge of the parade area. They swivelled everywhere, tracking Macharius and his group. Like every Guardsman there, I wondered what they were for.

Macharius seemed well pleased. I imagine it flattered his ego to be the centre of attention for tens of thousands of soldiers. I did not, at the time, know the half of it.

Macharius swept past us and at first it seemed the inspection was over, but no signal to disperse was given. Instead, he went over and stood in the shadow of one of the Baneblades, Number Ten if the truth be told. He paused for a moment and then with the lithe agility of a great cat he scrambled up the *Indomitable*'s side. He stood poised above the track-guards studying the assembled army, one hand shading his eyes. Beneath him the tech-priests focused their strange weapons on him, like assassins getting their target in their sights. Macharius just stood, unworried. He clearly knew what was happening. As ever, his certainty communicated itself to the watching troops.

Beneath him, the chief of the tech-priests made a symbolic gesture. The smell of ozone and technical incense filled the air and suddenly, in the air above us was the face and form of Macharius, magnified a dozen times, looking down on us like that of the Emperor himself as you have seen him on many a painted ikon. The huge handsome visage considered us all for a moment and then Macharius spoke, his voice rippling out over the assembled army like that of a primarch during the Great Crusade. I did not know it then but his speech was being relayed out across the system even as he spoke, to every orbiting ship, to every soldier in the vast army sweeping through the skies of the worlds of the Karsk system, to every soldier in the force descending onto the soil of Karsk IV, and every word was being recorded for posterity.

‘Soldiers of the Emperor,’ he said. His thunderous amplified voice was rasping and calm and filled with a quiet authority that commanded attention and belief. There was a trace of the accent of the backwater world that had birthed him, a rough metallic burr that marked his speech and which only vanished when he was talking to the very highest notables. ‘We stand on the brink of a mighty war.

‘Soon you will face the first battle of many against those who would defy the Emperor’s will and keep these human worlds buried in the foetid darkness of heresy and unbelief.

‘For their own selfish reasons they seek to withhold from their fellow man the Blessings of the Emperor’s Word and the goodness of His holy rule. We are here to save our fellows from this wickedness and restore order and light to these long-abandoned worlds.’

He paused for a moment as if overwhelmed by the scale of the evil he was contemplating. Not coincidentally, the pause gave his audience a moment to reflect on what he had said.

It was not the words themselves that convinced you. It was the tone in which he said them. When you heard Macharius speak you knew that he believed utterly in what he was saying, and that you should too. There was something about his blazing conviction that forced you to push aside any doubts and reassess your own thoughts on the matter.

The man had an immense presence, an enormous authority, an aura that enveloped him and everything he touched and transformed if not the words themselves then your perception of those words. All around me, hardened soldiers strained to hear what he had to say, listened as if their hope of salvation depended on it. More than any priest, more than any commissar, Macharius made you believe, in him if nothing else.

‘Today we take the first step towards our greater goal. It is an important step. If we falter here, we will fail. If we do not harden our resolve, foreswear false mercy and carry ourselves with the firmness of purpose this great task deserves, we will condemn billions of our fellow humans to lives of squalid darkness and eternities of torment in the toils of the daemons who feast on the souls of the damned. Do not let your finger rest on the trigger of your weapon. Sparing our enemies merely extends their lives for a pitiful eye-blink in the Emperor’s sight and condemns their souls for all eternity. Show mercy to the heretic and you do the work of daemons

yourself.’

We’ve all heard similar sermons preached before battles and on High Holy Days and I am damned if I can tell you what it was about Macharius that made his words different. Perhaps his lack of doubt communicated itself, but that could not be all. Many commissars I have known were every bit his equal in faith. No – it was something about the man. When Macharius spoke you could have been listening to the Emperor speaking to you from the depth of his Sacred Throne. I know it sounds like heresy, but that is what it felt like. Something had touched Macharius; maybe the light of the Emperor, maybe something else.

And then, in a moment, the whole mood of the thing changed. Macharius went from being a priest preaching a sermon to an officer talking to his men, telling them the plan, letting them know what they needed to know.

‘The way forwards is harsh. It carries us through lava seas and across great chasms where the jaws of the earth could swallow a Titan whole. It passes through sandstorms so powerful they can strip a man to the bloody bone in seconds. It takes us through clouds of poison so deadly that one breath is fatal.’

It should have sounded off-putting but he made it sound as if these were the sort of challenges that true men should expect to face and which it was their glory to overcome. His slight grim smile told you that he knew you, you personally, could overcome them. And he was letting us know that we were all in this together.

‘This is all to the good.’ He paused and smiled and as he had expected the whole army laughed at the joke, feeble as it was. Then his expression was grim again. ‘I am serious. It is all to the good. While we are doing this, the second part of our force will be assaulting Hive Irongrad from the south, along the easy route, the way they expect us to come. They will not expect a massive armoured assault from the north-west, and we shall hit them where we know the defences are weakest. We will have the pyrite refineries and the weapon factorums. We shall bring millions of lost souls into the Emperor’s Light.’

He paused again, to give what he had said time to sink in. We knew now where we were going, a hive city. He had even told us why.

If you have never had any experience of being a soldier in the Imperial Guard, you will probably not realise how unusual it was for a ranking

general like Macharius to say things like this to an assembled army. He was telling us the plan – personally. He was letting us know that there was one and that it was a good one, that he and his officers knew what they were doing, and that he personally was taking the time to communicate the details to you so that you understood your place in it, and you shared his faith in its efficacy.

He had the trick of pitching his voice and casting his eye over the crowd in such a way that you felt he was talking directly to you. You felt as though you mattered. As if you had a central role to play in this great scheme. Everyone present was as important as Macharius himself.

He spoke on, outlining the plan in broad strokes and making it clear where each major battlegroup was to move and strike. By the end of it, every man present must have felt as if they had as clear an idea of what was going to happen as Macharius himself and all of them shared his certainty of success.

When he vaulted down from the side of the Baneblade, you could probably have heard the cheers in Irongrad, hundreds of leagues away.

That was my first exposure to the legendary charisma of Macharius. It was not to be my last.

That evening we sat around the table in the galley again. We did not play cards.

‘So that was Macharius,’ Ivan said. A trickle of drool puddled in the rusty corner of his metal jaw. He took a swig of the coolant fluid. ‘Impressive.’

‘Yes, he was,’ said Anton. For once he looked thoughtful, and he sounded impressed.

‘I am surprised he never mentioned making you a Space Marine,’ said Ivan.

‘Don’t be a dick,’ Anton said. There was something in his voice that stopped the smart reply short in all our mouths. We had never seen him this way before. He was like a zealot whose faith has been called into question. It took a moment for it to sink in, exactly how impressed Anton was with the Lord High Commander. He looked like one of the newly converted in the Holy Temple meetings the preachers used to give back on Belial.

Anton grinned, showing his missing teeth, and the moment passed. ‘You should not make jokes about the man. He is going to lead us to the greatest

victory in Imperial history.’

Normally we would have fell to mocking him but not this time. Everyone in the galley had listened to Macharius. Everyone knew he was something special. He would have to be, to make someone like Anton speak with the conviction and vision of a prophet.

‘Let’s play cards,’ Ivan said. None of us were in the mood. All of us were filled with visions of victory, of what we were going to achieve. I believe if anyone had suggested prayer, we would have gone down on our knees on the spot.

‘I hear the speech was recorded on vision crystal and is being sent out to every unit in the army,’ Oily said. ‘That’s what all that Holy Mechanical Paraphernalia was for. Those words will be on record somewhere for as long as the Imperium endures.’

‘Aye, but we were there,’ Anton said. ‘We saw it for real.’

It was the first time I ever heard a veteran of Macharius’s armies speak in that tone you would hear afterwards, ever and anon, across the stars, in that mixture of pride and awe. We were there. We stood in his shadow. We were part of his legend.

It’s the truth too.

OceanofPDF.com

Exhibit 107D-21H Abstract of Report VII – XII – MIVI
To: High Inquisitor Jeremiah Toll, Sanctum Ultimus, Dalton's Spire.
Source: Drake, Hyronimus, High Inquisitor attached to the Grand Army of Reconquest.
Document under seal. Evidence of duplicity on the part of former High Inquisitor Drake. Cross-reference to decrypted personal journals. See Exhibit 107D-45G.

Walk in the Emperor's Light.

I watched Macharius speak to the troops yesterday, his words recorded for posterity and to be broadcast to every soldier in this great army. To describe the man as impressive is an understatement. He is utterly certain in his faith and utterly convincing in his manner and he communicated all that he sought as vividly and clearly as my old preceptors in the training school on Telos communicated basic theology.

I am convinced that the Council has made the correct decision placing this man in command of our Great Crusade. He seems worthy of the trust placed in him and I say this as one trained to judge all men with the greatest of scepticism and the most extreme wariness. It is possible, but only possible, that he is the prophesied one, whom we have so long awaited. There are many milestones to pass on that particular road before the truth will make itself known.

My agents within the Grand Army assure me that morale is at the highest it has ever been and that the troops are full of righteous zeal to perform the Emperor's Will. Even discounting the natural tendency of such agents to

exaggerate when reporting to a high inquisitor, the tone of their reports is very encouraging.

Macharius seems to have decided to trust me, at least in so far as he treats me amiably and explains his plans with the same forthrightness as he would explain them to any of his troops. I am allowed to attend all the staff meetings and there are no signs that anything is concealed. After so many decades of back-corridor intrigues I find this refreshing. It seems that Macharius is sincere in his attempt to forge a new army here and bury old rivalries among his commanders. It looks like this really is something new under the sun.

I digress. The plan for the reclamation of the Karsk system is under way. The army is ready to drive towards Irongrad arrayed in tight formation. Every company of troops has its own vehicles. All of them are in the highest state of maintenance and readiness. Progress will be swift. The main bulk of the battlegroup assaults Irongrad from the south. This force will sweep in out of the north towards the more lightly guarded parts of the great fortress city. All is to be done in accordance with Macharius's doctrine of attacking with the greatest of speed and the maximum of force at the enemy's weakest point. There are feints within feints.

Victory will be ours. It is what we will find once it is achieved that causes me disquiet. I have studied preliminary reports from our advance agents and negotiators and there is much here to recommend the attention of the Inquisition. What I have heard about the Cult of the Angel of Fire causes me some concern. It follows a pattern all too familiar to me from my early career. There are reports of human sacrifice of a most horrific sort. Such things often go hand in claw with the worship of terrible things.

Still we shall deal with such horrors when and if we encounter them. Sufficient unto tomorrow the problems of tomorrow.

The Blessings of the Emperor upon you.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THREE

Looking out of the scope I saw endless rows of armoured vehicles glittering in the early morning light. Greyish exhaust fumes made the air shimmer. Horns sounded. Engines roared. In my ear bead I could hear the constant chatter of comm-net communications. I was only supposed to be able to hear the lieutenant but there was some bleed through his monitor and very faintly in the background I heard signals coming down from the higher command echelons.

Out there, the army stirred like a great beast. Company after company of armoured vehicles made off, rolling downslope, crushing friable stone beneath their huge treads, raising enormous plumes of dust and ash as they gathered momentum.

I relaxed in the bucket seat and offered up some more technical prayers. I knew it would be several hours before we had to move. Our place was quite far back in the column. I looked down at the crystal of the console and watched the dots that represented units shimmer and shift, bees of greenish light swarming against a blood-red background.

I looked over at the New Boy. He had tilted his cap to one side in emulation of my manner. He caught me looking at him and grinned, a little nervously. It was understandable. We were not yet in any danger but this was the start of his first campaign and we would soon be moving into the eye of the storm of violence the Imperial Guard had brought to this world. He swallowed and made an aquila over his heart with his fingers and then

closed his eyes. His lips twisted slightly and I knew he was praying.

Over the Baneblade's internal comm-net the lieutenant's calm voice sounded, chanting out the First Battle Catechism and getting the expected answers first from Corporal Hesse then from the remainder of the crew stations, then the gunners. From deeper within the *Indomitable* came the sound of turrets rotating and guns elevating. The machine shuddered a little as barrels reached maximum elevation and locked.

One by one the great tanks of our company rolled out; I watched their massive forms disappear downslope into the great cloud of dust like enormous mastodons moving through the dawn of time.

'Lemuel, move us out,' said the lieutenant. I invoked the spirit and our engines roared to full life. Somewhere in the depths of the vehicle I heard cheers and prayers as the crew reacted to the movement each in their own way.

The great armoured monster that was the *Indomitable* rumbled to life beneath my hands. In that moment, I wondered if this was how Macharius felt when he gave orders to an army. The mighty vehicle responded to my commands like some great beast responding to its rider. I felt all of those hundreds of tons of weight move at my will. An armoured behemoth capable of crushing men to jelly beneath its treads, of crashing through buildings and destroying lesser vehicles by mass alone, responded to my hands on its ancient controls.

At that moment, I felt alive, as if I was doing what I was put in this world to do.

Ahead of us a wall of flames stretched to the horizon, as if the entire planet had caught fire and the world itself was burning. The sands of the desert were the red of blood. Even through the filters, the air had taken on a curious metallic tang. The column slowed almost to a halt and began to move forwards cautiously as the leading scouting vehicles reached the edge of the lava seas.

'You'll want to be careful here, Lemuel,' the lieutenant said. 'This is not the place to make a mistake. We're approaching the causeways and if we fall off we'll never see Belial again or anywhere else for that matter.'

The New Boy gulped. I suspected that if I could have seen his expression I would have discovered that he was glad that he was not the one driving

right now. I did not look. I was too busy concentrating on the paths ahead.

You could have marched an army over them company by company, but a Baneblade is not a company of soldiers. It can't narrow its frontage or move along in single file if it has to.

I could not see much ahead except for the clouds of dust raised by the tanks that had gone this way before, and the marks of their tracks in the reddish sand, and the ever-narrowing roadway as it pushed out into the lava sea.

Sea is misleading, it suggests waves and tides and regular movement. The lava was not like that. It glowed in different colours, from almost incandescent white to cherry red. It bubbled and it spurted. It was like a living thing. It was all too easy to imagine daemons living below its surface and emerging to devour the souls of men.

It was easy too to understand how the inhabitants of Karsk IV believed that the Angel of Fire stood at the right hand of the Emperor. Flame was the most powerful thing in this world. Its potency was a self-evident truth. Even the mighty frame of the *Indomitable* seemed a pitifully small thing compared to the endless, encroaching lava.

Not that I gave it too much attention. I was too busy keeping an eye on the path and making adjustments with the control sticks to keep us as close to the centre of it as possible. It was not easy. The way was neither regular nor smooth. Sometimes we would run up small slopes and I would feel the *Indomitable* tilt and for a horrible moment wonder if we were going to start sliding.

Ahead of us another Baneblade loomed out of the dust fog. The rock beneath its left tread had started to crumble. The weight of so many massive vehicles moving over the thin crust of this burning land was taking its toll. The driver struggled to keep the tank moving straight. As I watched it swerved dangerously close to the edge.

I wondered what was going on: guidance servo malfunction, driver drunkenness, misheard command over the comm-net. I slowed down to avoid a possible collision. It was easy to imagine getting knocked into the boiling lava by a misjudgement on the part of the lead driver. I hoped the drivers behind us were paying the same attention as I was.

I let out a long breath I did not know I had been holding as the tank in front got back on course. I heard a gentle curse from the New Boy.

It was going to be a long day.

We emerged from the lava paths into the ash deserts beyond. I felt as if a weight had lifted from my shoulders. All around huge Imperial tanks ploughed ahead at full speed, raising bow-sprays of sand and dust. There was a sense of swiftness and motion that had been sorely missed in the cramped volcanic paths through the lava.

The sun glared down, a gigantic cyclopean eye. I studied a horizon that looked like a sea suddenly petrified by the magic of daemons, waves turned red as blood, layered with cobalt blue. Everything had a tainted chemical look to it. Huge, chitinous things scurried out of the way of the tanks. A few were crushed to a bloody purple gel by the tracks.

Over the comm-net relieved chatter filled the lower-level links. Anton and Ivan must have been as worried as I; they could see what was happening from their gun-position and could not do anything about it. At least I had some say in what happened.

Vulture gunships skimmed overhead, engines thundering, exhaust contrails scarring the desert sky white, like claw-marks made by the talons of some huge invisible beast, their twin-tailed shadows gliding over the sand beneath them.

The tac-map showed the position of an oasis ahead. The holo-spheres representing our forces were already surrounding it. In the distance a few brief high explosive shots rang out as some pueblo village rejoined the dust from which it emerged before our position could be reported.

Anton grumbled over the comm-net to Ivan. ‘The vanguard get all the fun.’

‘We’ll be in battle soon enough,’ Ivan replied. ‘You’ll have your chance to blow something up then.’

‘Can’t come soon enough for me,’ said Anton.

‘Stow the chatter, lads,’ said the lieutenant, patching himself in to the lower level. ‘Keep your eyes peeled for heretics. They will be out there somewhere.’

‘Right you are, sir,’ said Ivan. He sounded almost cheerful but then he always did when there was a fight in the offing. There was a darkness in Ivan that responded to incipient violence. I’ve seen a lot of soldiers get that way. Combat is a drug for them.

We thundered across the wastelands, engines roaring, officers barking out calm commands. I felt part of a vast invincible war machine, certain of victory, assured of triumph. I tried to enjoy the feeling while I could.

I knew it wouldn't last.

The night was quiet. We stood beside the tank and looked at the stars. They glittered cold and clear in the blackness of the firmament. All around us lay the rubble of a pueblo. There was no sign it had ever been a military outpost, no sign that it had been anything much. The buildings were in ruins. If it had not been for the fires that still burned in some, they might have been that way for tens of thousands of years.

One by one we clambered up the side of the *Indomitable* and looked out of the crater we had set ourselves hull-down in. As far as the eye could see were the silhouettes of armoured vehicles. Men swarmed over and around them, doing what we were doing, escaping from the cramped inner quarters, stretching their legs looking at the night sky. Somewhere in the distance someone was playing a harmonica. It was an old tune from Belial, *My Girl Has Eyes of Blue*.

To the south, the sky turned white then black then white again in eerie flickers. A sound like thunder raced across the desert in its wake. If I had not known there was a battle being fought below the horizon, I would have suspected it was the mother of all storms, racing towards us through the night.

I sat with my back to the main turret of the machine with my legs dangling over the side. Anton had draped himself over the barrel of a gun and hung there like a spider-lemur we had once paid to see in the zoo in Jansen Hive. Ivan took a swig of coolant fluid from his flask, wiped the mouth of it and passed it to me. I took a swig and handed it up to Anton.

'It was awesome today, passing through the lava sea,' he said eventually.

Ivan belched loudly then whistled.

'You didn't have to do the driving,' I said.

'I suppose you want us to thank you for getting us through alive,' Anton said.

'It's my job,' I said.

'What you think they were like?' Ivan asked.

'Who?' I said.

‘The folks who lived here.’

‘Like us I suppose. This is a human world.’

‘You think they woke up this morning expecting to be dead?’ Ivan asked. The booze was making him melancholy, as it usually did.

‘A world like this, yes, most likely.’ Anton replied. ‘It does not seem the most pleasant of places.’

‘Why would you build a place out here in the desert?’

‘Could be a relay station,’ I said. ‘Could be a rich man’s ranch. Could be an energy farm. Who knows? Who cares?’

The coolant fluid came back my way. I took another swig. It tasted like medicine but kicked like a drill sergeant. Lasgun fire flickered down below us. I reached for my combat shotgun but Ivan shook his head. ‘It’s just Oily and the boys tormenting one of those big scorpions.’

I squinted into the darkness. By the light of las-burst I recognised the mechanic’s squat form. He and a bunch of others were flash-frying one of the beasts, probably wanted to know what it tasted like.

‘You know it’s strange,’ Ivan said, not in the least distracted from the job of depressing the rest of us. ‘There’s a whole army down there. This is probably the most people who have ever stood in this spot. Will most likely be until the end of time, till the stars burn out and the Emperor walks again.’

‘And your point is?’ I asked. Ivan shook his head and laughed bitterly. I heard the metal of the flask clink against the metal of his jaw.

‘We’ll never come back this way. We’ll never see this place again. We blasted it to bits in the name of the Emperor and tomorrow we will be gone and all that will be left will be wasteland.’

‘By the Emperor’s Throne, you are a miserable bastard, Ivan,’ Anton said. ‘I came out here happy to see the stars. Another five minutes of listening to you and I’ll be ready to eat a grenade.’

‘You’ll never get to be a Space Marine if you do that,’ Ivan said. His mood was contagious though. Even Anton seemed thoughtful now.

‘You think they’ll have big guns over there?’ he asked.

‘It’s a hive city – what do you think?’ I said.

‘Big enough to blow a hole in a Baneblade the way we blew this place up?’

‘Big enough,’ I said.

‘I can see what this miserable bastard is so depressed about then,’ said Anton.

‘It’s the way the world is,’ said Ivan. ‘Always somebody with a bigger gun. One day you’re doing the blowing up, next day you’re being exploded yourself.’

‘Not if we’re lucky,’ I said. ‘It’ll be some other poor bastard’s turn.’

I was fighting hard to keep up my spirits. The mood of total belief in victory that Macharius had given us had vanished into the night air. At least so it seemed for just a moment.

‘How can we lose?’ said Anton. ‘We’ve got Macharius with us.’

‘You’re probably right,’ said Ivan. ‘He does not seem like a man in the habit of losing.’

And as quickly as it had come, the mood of pessimism vanished, seemingly dispelled by the magic of the general’s name. In the distance thunder rumbled. The ancient daemon gods of war beat their drums. Man-made lightning flickered. Somebody somewhere was dying.

Soon it would be time for us to join in.

A monstrous storm blew in from the north. The hot desert winds brought clouds of abrasive dust. It ground along the side of the *Indomitable*, stripping the paintwork in places. The filters kept most of it out, but the air had a strange taste and my mouth felt gritty. My eyes watered so much I was forced to pull down my visor. Everybody else in the cockpit did the same thing.

The winds were strong enough to send small pebbles pinging like bullets off our hull. The external comm-net crackled. Only occasional fragments of vox were audible. There was something about the weather on this planet potent enough to disrupt even our comm-grids. That was disturbing to say the least.

I kept the Baneblade rumbling forwards, knowing that the dust would work its way into the mechanisms of the treads and eventually break them down. It would be unfortunate if it happened. There was no way anyone could go outside and perform field repairs. If we dropped behind the main battlegroup there would be no help available either. We would be stuck out in the desert until the recycling systems overloaded and we died of hunger, thirst or bad air. It seemed unlikely that anyone would come looking for us

while a war was being fought.

Even as these thoughts flitted through my mind, I concentrated on the way forwards. The New Boy was driving as my relief but I watched him like a hawk in case he made a mistake. I was ready to override the controls if any enemy appeared.

The lieutenant obviously felt the tension in the air. He spoke reassuringly into our local net, as if to make up for the lack of external chatter. ‘I’m glad I am inside on a day like today,’ he said. ‘Now is not the time for going for a little walk in the fresh air.’

There were some chuckles at that, and the truth of it was that he was right. There was something oddly reassuring and even perhaps a little enjoyable about being inside a monstrous armoured vehicle and immune to the ravages of the deadly storm outside.

‘Even the weather is on Macharius’s side,’ he said. ‘If this storm does not cover our approach nothing will.’

That was certainly an optimistic interpretation of events but who was I to disagree? It was possible he was right. The lieutenant knew more about these things than I did.

‘How long you think this will go on for, sir?’ the New Boy asked.

‘Our tac briefing says these storms can last for days. Sometimes the air outside can get so hot it’s like stepping into a furnace. The heat would kill you if the dust did not strip you to the bone first.’

A pebble ricocheted off the hull as if to emphasise his point. It sounded as if someone was firing a boltgun at us.

‘It’s why every part of this force is mechanised. There’s no other way of fighting on this planet until we’re close enough to the hives to find some cover. Now keep your eyes peeled. We’re getting close to the outer perimeter defences. There are bunkers full of big guns and lascannons. If this storm keeps up we’ll bypass them and cut them off from supply. If it dies down all of a sudden, we need to be ready to fight.’

As if some daemon of the storm had heard him, the sound of the wind began to die away. The grinding noise lessened. Chatter on the external comm-net became audible again.

The great billowing clouds of dust started to settle, except where the passing of the tanks set it swirling.

‘Oh shit,’ I heard someone say. A glance into the periscope told me why.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOUR

Ahead of us lay an enormous armoured bunker. It was the size of a small hill, reinforced with plascrete and sheets of durasteel. The maws of several very large guns pointed in our direction. A huge turret traversed towards us. I hit the override and took the controls from the New Boy. He tugged at the sticks for a few moments not realising what was happening. It was hard to blame him. The same thing had happened to me the first time I went into battle. I glanced around at the terrain. Dunes undulated all around us, some of them large enough to provide us with some cover. I picked the most likely looking of them and sent us in that direction a fraction of a second before the lieutenant gave the order to take us hull-down.

Of course, the dune would not provide the slightest smidgeon of protection against the blast from one of those lascannons. That was not the point. The point was not even to hide us from view. It was to make us less visible than all the other tanks around us. If we were less of a target, the enemy would seek somebody else. I would not have wished death on anybody on our side, but our first task was to see that we stayed alive. Dead men win no battles and they certainly do not tell tales about them afterwards.

The lieutenant barked orders into the comm-net. I heard Ivan and Anton and the others respond. The whole Baneblade vibrated as all of our batteries went off at once, thundering at one of those distant guns.

Lines of las-fire stabbed out at us from the smaller emplacements in the bunker. It was stupid. Hitting a Baneblade with a light weapon was like

menacing an elephant with a sulphur match. Those weapons would have cut infantrymen down like chaff but were useless against us.

Our fire blasted into one of the larger emplacements, sending shards of broken metal flying. That was one gun silenced. As I watched, smaller Chimera units surged forwards across the dunes. Heavy bolters blazed from the small-looking turrets on top of their hulls. Blasts from the pillbox tore a few of them apart but many more got close, then huge explosions from below sent them hurtling broken skywards.

‘Minefield,’ I heard the lieutenant mutter. ‘Lemuel, take us in, we are going to clear a path.’

There was no point arguing. The commander’s chair was behind mine. He could put a bullet through my brain if he even suspected mutiny, which in truth was not something I had in mind.

As I urged the *Indomitable* forwards I was thinking more of the possibility that the mines might be powerful enough to breach our hull and that we would be sitting targets for those batteries in the great fortress.

The lieutenant just kept talking into the comm-net. Ahead of us the Chimeras began to reverse, moving out of our paths like a swarm of crypt rats passing round a mastodon. I saw one or two broken bodies in the minefield, one or two men still moving. I did my best to ignore them and the thought that in a few minutes that could be me.

I nudged the Baneblade forwards. Something exploded beneath us. For a moment, I felt as if my heart was going to stop. I heard the New Boy groan and when I looked over his face was white. The hull vibrated like a great drum but held.

‘Keep us moving forwards, Lemuel. Those mines are not strong enough to stop us.’ I wished I was as sure of that as the lieutenant was. He calmly commanded the turrets to keep up a stream of fire into the gun emplacements even as one of those mighty lascannons started to rotate towards us. I knew that if we were directly in its sights then we were dead for sure. Such a powerful, fixed position gun had power enough to take out even a tank like the *Indomitable*. Another mine went off. For a moment, the Baneblade shuddered and threatened to stop. It felt as if even the massive weight of the ancient tank was not enough to keep it on the ground. For a heartbeat I feared that one of the drive-trains had given way and that we were immobilised. The old monster kept crawling forwards. Our guns raked

the nearest positions. Brown-clad infantrymen rose up out of concrete foxholes and scurried away. What might have been a commissar rose to shoot them. A hail of fire from our anti-personnel weapons killed soldier and leader both. The lascannon kept traversing towards us. It would only be a matter of moments now before it had us in its sights.

‘Keep moving, Lemuel,’ the lieutenant said. ‘Just a few more metres.’

Suddenly I understood what he was doing. I fed the engines as much power as they would take and we surged forwards passing under the line of fire of the great lascannon. Its beam scorched the earth behind us but we were safe. The barrel of it could not be depressed any lower. We were under its arc of fire.

Along the path we had cleared through the minefield Chimeras raced forwards, guided by the mark of our tracks. The other Bane-blades were doing the same now. Within minutes the minefield was breached and our infantry swarmed over the sides of the pillbox, clearing bunkers and foxholes, breaking through the armoured security doors and swarming into the interior. We sat outside in the sun and provided them with covering fire.

‘That’s our first objective taken,’ said the lieutenant with some satisfaction.

‘Yes, sir,’ said the Understudy. ‘Everything is going according to plan.’

I wondered about that. I really did. Would it really have gone so well if the lieutenant had not been there, and seen the weakness in the minefields. And what if he had been wrong, what if the mines had been able to destroy the Baneblade. You can drive yourself mad thinking about such things. It’s best to stick to the things that actually happen and not what might have been. That’s a good rule when thinking about life in general, as about the wars you have fought in.

By noon the sun, at its highest point, gazed down on our triumph. Prisoners were rounded up and disarmed or shot. We had won a small victory but it was a victory and that is always a good way to open a campaign, as I am sure Macharius and the lieutenant at least understood.

We climbed down from the Baneblade to stretch our legs. We had been given a break and who knew how long it would be before we managed to get out of the tank’s claustrophobic interior.

The air smelled different. We lost the tang of incense and filtered air and

cooped up sweaty bodies we had inside. I could smell the desert and explosives and burning and something else disturbing.

Atop a nearby ridge I noticed something. It was a cage, made of metal, resting on a metal platform on a high spot above us. It was an odd shape – not square like most of cages I had seen but curved towards the top. Inside it were a number of x-shaped structures made from metal. I was too far away to make out what exactly these cages contained although I could see that they were blackened and scorched and covered in what appeared to be soot. Curious, I set off up the hill, shouldering my shotgun just in case. Anton and Ivan followed me.

I began to notice something else about the cages. Beneath them was some sort of residue. The bottoms seemed more scorched than the tops as if fires had been lit beneath them and heated the metal framework. As I got closer, I saw that this was exactly the case and I saw something else. There were fire-blackened human skeletons attached to the x-frames within the cages. They had been chained there.

‘What in the name of the Emperor?’ Ivan said and whistled. Anton just let out a high-pitched nervous giggle as if not quite able to come to terms with what he was seeing. I walked closer, thinking there must be some mistake.

There was no mistake. Somebody had chained up a number of men within the cages. They had set them alight. In places the flesh was scorched black, in other places pink meat and charred bone was visible where the flesh had sloughed away. Long metal tentacles descended from the top of the cage. They contacted the scorched skulls. At first I thought they were more chains designed to lift the victims’ heads at an unnatural angle but then I saw they were fire-proof tubes connected to metal rebreather filters over the victims’ mouths.

I stared, not quite able to get to grips with what I was seeing. It was mechanically-minded Anton who figured it out.

‘The tubes kept those poor bastards breathing,’ he said.

‘What?’ Ivan said.

‘The smoke from the flames might have suffocated them. The tubes fed air into their lungs, kept them breathing while the flames burned them alive.’

He paused for a moment and thought for a moment. ‘No. It was worse. They were not just burned alive. There are heating elements in the metal. The bars, the chains, those cross-bars would all be white hot. They would

be branded as they burned.’

‘Why?’ I asked, for once not astonished by the fact I was asking Anton the reason for something.

‘Dunno,’ he said. ‘Discipline maybe?’

‘You mean like a flogging?’

‘More like an execution.’

‘They are a cruel bunch on this world,’ said Ivan. We had lived under Imperial Guard discipline for a decade so you had to plumb impressive depths for Ivan to think you were cruel.

We walked around the cages, looking at them from all angles, trying to make sense of what was going on here. I’ve fought orks and they can be vicious but this was something else. It was calculated and strange and nasty beyond words. Someone had wanted whoever was imprisoned in these cages to suffer in the most profound way, to drag out every second of their blazing agony as their red-hot surroundings consumed their lives.

I stopped and stared at it for a long time.

‘What are you thinking, Leo?’ Anton asked.

‘I am thinking it would be a bad idea to be taken prisoner by whoever did this.’

‘You’ll get no arguments from me,’ said Ivan.

‘If I find the bastards who do this stuff, I’ll show them the sort of burning a lasgun can do,’ said Anton. He meant it to sound mean. It came out frightened.

I turned away from the cage and looked down at the aftermath of the battle. There were tens of thousands of Imperial Guardsmen down there, swarming over the position like ants, and I was suddenly very glad of that.

I could see the *Indomitable* and Corporal Hesse on top of it, waving up at us.

‘You reckon we ought to report this?’

I glanced around. From up here I could see there were other cages and other groups of soldiers and officers clustered around them, gawping.

‘I don’t think we’ll need to,’ I said. ‘Other people have already noticed.’

The columns of our mechanised force roared southwards, moving as fast as they could. Valkyries and Vultures filled the sky overhead. All around us the landscape began to change. Great pipelines ran to the horizon. Signs of

human occupation became more visible: empty irrigation canals and the huge crystalline geodesics of hydroponic farms. There were small pueblos and larger hab-zones.

Sometimes in the distance I caught sight of dust plumes as if refugees were fleeing before us. Sometimes, very far in the distance the clouds seemed to glow, although I had no idea why.

So far, we had not met any real opposition, which was worrying. Karsk was an industrial world – it should have had a mighty army defending it. We had overcome all resistance a little too easily.

I found it suspicious.

I could tell from the chat that I heard on the comm-net that the others were uneasy too. Ivan was making a few slurred jokes about how soft the heretics were. We were all wondering when the real war would begin.

Here and there about the landscape were more of the cages for burning folks alive. Some of them were large enough to hold hundreds. They seemed to become more common as we approached the city.

The ground beneath us was firmer now. We were out of the great ash deserts and on to what was either more solid rock or a foundation of plascrete set there for purposes of construction. The buildings started huddling together to form small towns. We swept by them, heading for our goal. It was swiftly becoming visible on the horizon.

A huge excrescence emerged out from the planet itself, a dense jumble of towers, each thrusting into a polluted sky. The clouds hung so low over the city that they obscured the top of the towers, as if the world was ashamed of Irongrad and sought to hide it beneath a blanket of fog. It took some time for me to realise that the clouds and fog were a product of the city itself, so strong was this initial impression. At the very tip of the hive where it vanished into the clouds, the sky was lighter and flickered as if something was aflame within the toxic fog.

Around the city were what looked to be the cones of small volcanoes. Some of them were. Others were the terminus of pipes for industrial waste. It bubbled up and formed slagheaps and polluted ash fields.

The city had an odd organic look. Effluent from the factorum towers had flowed down like lava from a volcano. It had been caught in prepared frameworks and allowed to harden, forming layers between the buildings, roofs on which other structures had been built. Some of the layers looked

like hardened candle wax. Others had been sculpted by builders. The imprint of intelligence was all too clear. Huge greenhouses glittered on the slopes.

Irongrad was as large a hive city as any I have ever seen and Belial was not a world short of giant metropolises. Each of those towers was a small fortress in and of itself. Each was like the bulkhead in a ship – it could be sealed off and defended even if its neighbours were taken or destroyed. And that would only be the beginning. Most of the city was hidden from view. Hives have endless layers, one on top of the other, descending into the very bowels of the planet.

The possibility of fighting street to street and block to block in that vast apparition was not a reassuring one. Of course, we had enough firepower to level the place if the need should arise. I told myself that was an idiotic thought – the whole purpose of the invasion was to take Irongrad and its pyrite processing plants. We needed what they could produce in order to keep the Crusade moving across the stars.

Another thought occurred to me – if they really wanted to cripple us, the inhabitants could simply destroy the city and thus remove all strategic reason for us attacking them. Of course, that would mean sacrificing their homes and seeking refuge in the empty, deadly desert. It would mean the rulers of that great hive city forswearing all of their wealth and possessions and reducing themselves to paupers simply in order to thwart our will and the will of the Imperium.

In my experience few nobles would do such a thing unless they felt they had absolutely no option. At the very least, as a last resort, they could use the destruction of the processing plants as a negotiating tool when and if they surrendered.

Of course, Macharius’s plan had taken this into account – one reason for this attack from the north was to seize the parts of the city in which the processing plants were concentrated while all of the defenders were in the southern zones of the city. On paper it was a very clever plan but it has been my experience that plans often encounter practical difficulties in the execution.

Looking at that huge city as it came inexorably closer it was hard not to feel dwarfed by it. Our force, which just a few hours before had seemed so irresistibly mighty, now seemed barely adequate for its purpose. Perhaps

Macharius had misjudged things. He would not be the first Imperial General to do such a thing, and surely he would not be the last.

How many people were in that hive, I wondered. Millions? Tens of millions? It did not seem possible that we could subdue them all.

Set amid the outskirts of the city, scattered among the slag heaps and volcanic maws were a number of fortresses, joined by thick walls along whose tops ran communicating roads allowing for the quick movement of reinforcements. Massive batteries of guns spiked out of them, covering the approaches. Tens of thousands of troops were moving into position even though most of the defenders had been drawn off to the south, leaving only a greatly reduced number of guardians on Irongrad's northern side.

It all looked formidable enough, with enormous turret-topped, armoured towers rising redly out of the desert. From them, guns spoke in voices of thunder. Towering plumes of ash rose all around us. Columns of dust erupted hundreds of metres high, springing into being at the summons of the distant muzzle flashes. The earth shook as if a gang of angry giants stomped a ritual war dance upon it. The beams of giant lascannon fused desert sand to crystalline slag. I prayed that one of them would not come to bear on us. I had the feeling that even a Baneblade might be reduced to fused metal in the blink of an eye by one of those awful weapons.

Our own forces were not slow to respond. Valkyries surged forwards through a hail of anti-aircraft fire and dropped their cargoes of storm troopers on the walls of the forts and the towers of the gates. As I watched dozens of them were hit and spiralled to the earth, belching black smoke. The rest kept coming, a swarm of angry mechanical insects attacking an enemy hive.

At the lieutenant's command I put us hull-down behind a dune. Our guns began to pound away at the heretics. I could see Chimeras, Manticores and Leman Russes hull-down along the tops of walls, blasting for all they were worth.

I had a view of the clear killing ground around the walls. For brief moments, it was empty of all life, with only buildings and craters and columns of dust rising in front of me. Then our force moved forwards, an inexorable tide staining the desert as it went. Thousands upon thousands of armoured vehicles belched fire at the distant walls behind which the hive

towers rose like man-made mountains. The scream of rockets and roar of guns was dimly audible even through the hull of the Baneblade.

Our attacks clawed at the sides of the enemy fortifications pitting and scoring them. A titanic explosion split the side of one massive pillbox. Somehow, by one of those chances that sometimes occur in battle, a magazine had been hit and its contents had exploded in a chain reaction that tore the structure apart.

It was as if the sword of the Emperor had descended from the sky and split the world asunder. There was a flash so bright it was dazzling and the photo-mirrors of the periscope went temporarily black as the spirits reacted to protect our sight. When they became clear again, I could see a gigantic crater where the fortress had been.

'Bad structural design,' said the lieutenant, as if that explained everything. Suddenly I had a sense of something badly wrong. Glancing around I could see one of those massive guns was pointing directly at us. I felt the urge to slam the treads of the *Indomitable* into reverse. It was too late. Time seemed to slow as it sometimes does in moments of maximum danger.

I swear I saw the distant muzzle of that enormous gun flash and something huge blur towards us. A moment later the Baneblade rocked under a massive impact. Somebody somewhere in the cockpit screamed.

It was a natural and understandable fear but the old monster had been built to withstand worse and its front armour was the strongest part of the tank. The lieutenant rapped out orders, calling for damage reports. The all-clear came in from every part of the *Indomitable*. At the end, the lieutenant said, 'The Adeptus Mechanicus builds tanks better than the locals build fortresses.' Everyone laughed in relief and the tension melted away. Our turrets blasted away at their targets. Our ears were still ringing from the hammer blow of the impact.

'Move us back a couple of hundred metres, Lemuel,' the lieutenant ordered. 'Straight back, front facing the enemy at all times.'

As if he had to tell me that. It seemed that even the lieutenant preferred not to have a repeat of another direct hit. A few seconds later another shell landed where we had been. It blasted a crater a hundred metres wide in the earth but we were not there to enjoy it.

As we retreated other Baneblades hove into view on either side of us. I studied the rear monitor, making sure we did not run into anything or back

off a precipice. Men have been killed and tanks destroyed by stupider things in the heat of battle.

As we moved the gunner got the distance once again. Another mighty blow smashed into us. Such was its force that the front of the *Indomitable* rose into the air a metre or so and then fell back to earth.

I felt the crash through the padding of my seat. Ikons swung on their chains above me. I heard the New Boy groan as if he had banged his head on something. When I looked over he was bleeding from where his head had hit the ‘scope.

Our turrets kept blasting. The lieutenant kept issuing clipped orders and I kept us moving out of the arc of enemy fire. We were lucky – after the initial burst none of the really big guns targeted us and the smaller enemy weapons simply were not powerful enough to harm Number Ten. I saw one of our brother Baneblades brewed up, oily black smoke pouring from its broken chassis. The dead bodies of some of the crew sprawled out of emergency hatches while the rest of its crew stood forlornly in the sand beside their former home.

Shadowswords erupted through one of the city gates, moving with great speed. They looked surprisingly long and lean for such large vehicles. As mighty as our own mightiest vehicles, their long guns could take out even a Baneblade or a Titan; they were mobile and deadly, great predators of the battlefield capable of destroying anything that they encountered. Supported by the heavy batteries within the city they might just turn the fight against us, if there were enough of them. I counted five emerging through the monster gate.

I have no idea where they came from. Perhaps they were a reserve unit swiftly rushed to the north of the city, perhaps they had simply been in the area. Their volcano cannons smashed into our smaller tanks and destroyed them with one shot.

A couple of them blew the treads of another Baneblade, immobilising it. I studied them through the periscope feeling the first surge of apprehension as opposed to fear. Those mighty tanks in their brown and red paint jobs and their low sleek silhouettes represented really worthy foes.

They raced right out at us, determined to find targets. The sheer boldness of it gave them a brief advantage. They destroyed a dozen or so of our

Leman Russ before anyone responded. Those volcano cannons were capable of wreaking terrible havoc on even the heaviest chassis. Tension twisted in my gut as I saw the harm they were causing.

Someone on our side realised what was happening. I heard the background buzz of orders on the lieutenant's channel and then he rapped out commands. Our heavy turrets spoke. I saw one of our shells land next to the leading heretic heavy tank. It chewed up the tread, sending it snapping off, leaving the Shadowsword rotating on the spot, going round and round on one tread until its driver cut the power, leaving it a sitting duck.

A curtain of heavy weapons fire descended on it, obscuring it from sight. When the dust cleared the red Shadowsword was burning from end to end, its rear quarters mangled, its long barrelled killing gun twisted and useless.

The lieutenant calmly called out some more coordinates. I looked in the direction he indicated and another company of Shadowswords swept into view, coming over the dunes from the south-west. The lieutenant told me to turn and I brought the Baneblade round to face the new foes. Other heavy vehicles on our side joined us.

We got off the first shots and once again immobilised the leading Shadowsword, forcing the others to come round. I did not like this one little bit. If more and more heretic tanks arrived on our flanks they might be able to roll along our line and do terrible damage. Caught between the anvil of the incoming heavy tanks and the hammer of those heavy batteries we would be smashed to bits. I felt a moment of stark fear. I had no idea what we were facing, how many more enemies might descend on our flanks, whether I would be dead in the next few minutes. My mouth felt dry. My heartbeat raced. All it would take was one shot from one of those long-barrelled tank-destroyers and we would be gone.

More and more tanks hove into view till I gave up counting them. I had no idea how many more of the heretics were still to come. On the front line it really does not matter how much bigger your force is if the enemy has local superiority.

Our tanks were hitting their targets. The enemy as often as not would miss. Their formations were sloppy. They did not go hull-down until it was too late.

The difference between veterans of half a dozen campaigns and untested troops from the planetary defence levies was starting to show. I noticed too

that green blobs on the holo-screen were circling round to the north of us. It would not be long before the flanking force of the enemy would find itself outflanked. All we had to do was hold our ground. Their vehicles did not seem as strong as they ought to be either. Obviously they had been constructed in-system and most likely from corrupted templates.

Shots clanged off our hull. Every time I heard that horrific clamour I thought for a second that I was going to die. I held my breath, as if by doing so I could somehow postpone the moment when I took my last lungful of air. I prayed the *Indomitable* would not catch fire. It is every tankman's worst nightmare, to be trapped within a burning vehicle.

At last our own flanking force was in position. I could not see what was happening but the heretics in front of us began to reverse, moving away from us. The lieutenant ordered us forwards in pursuit. We passed the burned out shells of those red-and-brown tanks. Our anti-personnel gunners mowed down their fleeing crews. I crushed one screaming man beneath our treads. Soon we were on the reverse side of another slope.

Our own forces were hammering in from the north-west. The retreating heretics had been caught in the flank, hit where their armour was weakest. A few had turned to face these new attackers and were now presenting sides and rear to us. The lieutenant was not slow to take advantage of this, nor were the Baneblades of our formation. Soon what had looked like a threatening force had been reduced to smoking slag. We looked down on a graveyard of broken tanks and fleeing crew who swiftly fell victim to our heavy bolters.

Looking east, I could see the same thing as the lieutenant saw. One of the gates in the city wall was open. Obviously the attacking force had come through it. It was not yet shut. I wondered whether something had gone wrong with the closing mechanism. It was either a huge opportunity or a deadly trap. I heard the lieutenant make a swift call up the open command channel. I was very surprised by what I heard next.

'This is General Sejanus! Advance and capture the gate. Hold it for as long as you can. Reinforcements are on their way.'

I thought it was all very well for the general to give those orders. He was not the one heading straight to his death if it should prove to be a trap. Nonetheless the lieutenant did not hesitate.

'You heard the general, Lemuel! Make for the gate.' He sounded as if he

was on a training manoeuvre.

‘As you wish, sir,’ I said, trying to keep my voice from quaking. The walls of the city came ever closer. I kept my eyes focused on the gate, not certain whether to hope or be afraid that it was going to slide shut in front of us. I half expected us to be targeted by the city defence but most of the defenders’ attention seemed to be focused on the battle raging on the far side of the ridge. Was it really possible that no one had noticed us?

A shot from something massive answered my question for me. The Baneblade shook, a rivet dropped from the ceiling above me. I heard what sounded like shrieks of fear echoing along the corridor.

‘Hull breach,’ I heard the lieutenant say. What in the name of the Emperor could have done that, I wondered? Maybe one of the Shadowswords had caught us unawares.

‘Keep us moving forwards, Lemuel,’ the lieutenant said. ‘Hard right five degrees.’ That correction would put us off-course for the gate. But a second later another blast impacted the ground where we had been. The earth shook as if a daemon-god were stamping his foot. It seemed whatever was shooting at us had got the range.

‘Hard left eight degrees, emergency speed,’ said the lieutenant. I did as I was told. The Baneblade picked up speed and shuddered as the same titanic impact split the ground behind us. I felt sick to my stomach, thinking about the sort of weapon that could hole a Baneblade and the fact that we were being targeted by it. The lieutenant gave no sign of nerves.

‘Steady all,’ he said into the internal comm-net. ‘We’ll soon be below the angle of fire.’ That could not happen a moment too soon, I thought.

Through the periscope I could see tiny figures in the gateway. They looked like tech-priests and they were working frantically on some exposed mechanism. The lieutenant spoke. Our guns roared. Anton and Ivan placed shells right in the opening, tearing those distant tiny figures to bloody pulp.

Maybe this was not a trap. Maybe this was a chance to be the first into the city, to cover ourselves in glory. As the lieutenant spoke, I was already revving the drives to the max, sending us ploughing across the wastelands towards the gateway, huge dust columns sloughing skywards in our wake. Figures on the wall had noticed us now. Tiny people gesticulated frantically in our direction. Another maintenance team rushed into the gateway and died just as quickly as their predecessors.

We were almost within the arch now. We were going to be the first into the city. I was excited in spite of myself, as were the others. They cheered and whooped over the comm-net. It was idiotic. For all we knew we were about to be blown to the Throne of the Emperor by heretic heavy weapons, but we could not help ourselves.

On the wall, soldiers opened fire, blazing away pitifully with lasguns and heavy bolters. A few of them threw frag grenades at us. They might as well have used the airguns we had for toys during our childhood back on Belial.

Our return fire swept them from the wall. Some were cut in half. Others had their heads blown apart. The lucky few managed to duck down behind the plascrete and get out of sight.

I heard the lieutenant report that we were in. More vehicles were moving into position behind us and more Chimera-mounted troops were being diverted our way to take advantage of this sudden gap in the defences.

Following the lieutenant's orders I drove a few hundred metres down the street and brought us to a halt at an intersection where we could block the way and keep the heretics from retaking the gate. I felt as if it was only a matter of time before someone realised what was going on and began to make the effort.

'That was fortunate,' I heard the lieutenant say. There was a certain understandable satisfaction in his voice. It had been lucky but there still needed to be someone who understood the opportunity and took advantage of it on the spot and he had been the man. There would be decorations in it for him and most likely a promotion. I did not grudge him it. He was a better commander and a better man by far than many officers in the regiment.

The Understudy could hardly disagree. 'You are correct, sir.'

'Now all we have to do is make sure the enemy don't retake the gate and try not to get killed while we are doing so,' said the lieutenant. 'What do you think, Private Lemuel?'

His voice was calm but I could tell he was in a good mood from the fact he had chosen to talk to me at such a crucial moment.

'I think that's a good idea, sir,' I said. 'If we can hold on for an hour or so, we'll take the city for sure.'

'We were always going to take the city, private,' he said. 'This has just made it a little quicker, that's all.'

I nodded so he could see the back of my head going up and down. Speaking again would be leaving a hostage to fortune. Looking at the tactical map I could see our forces were rushing ever closer.

Darkness was starting to fall as we rumbled through the outskirts of Irongrad, crushing parked groundcars beneath our treads. Our way was lit by the glow of giant flames of industrial gases vented from the sides of the factorum towers. In the distance, something even brighter illuminated the underbelly of the clouds in the sky over the central hive.

Resistance was very light. Macharius's plan had succeeded. Ahead of us was an entire factorum zone filled with the pyrite production facilities that we needed. In a matter of hours we had seized all of them and taken up defensive positions to prevent the troops of Irongrad from retaking them.

The lieutenant ordered me to put the Baneblade hull-down behind a factorum wall so that our guns would still be able to rake the approaches. I did as I was told and the great armoured beast came to rest. We sat there at our controls studying the empty streets and the mighty towers surrounding us and waited for the enemy to approach. It had been many hours since we had had any sleep. I munched on a stimm tab and protein bar combination washed down by a swig of brackish water from my canteen.

I glanced out through the periscope, studying the long shadows. I was not unduly troubled. I would be able to see anything that approached and mechanised infantry were starting to deploy on foot around us, taking up positions on top of the walls, setting up heavy bolters to rake the streets. One or two of them were already snatching some sleep where they lay. It was nice to know we had some veterans with us. The two-tailed airframe of a Valkyrie hovered above some huts while storm troopers swarmed down a fibre-rope ladder descending into the clouds of trash and dust raised by the aircraft's drives. They deployed by squad; their heavy carapace armour made them look bulkier than a normal man, and their outsize lasguns did nothing to make them look less formidable.

A line of fire darted out from its nose-mounted cannon. I wondered whether the gunner was firing at hidden heretics or just practising on some of the local giant rats. Such things have been known to happen.

I glanced around the command cabin. The lieutenant was cat-napping while the Understudy watched the tactical grids. Our commander still had

his headpiece in and I knew from long experience that any incoming signal would wake him. Looking at him with his head slumped on his chest I felt something like affection. Once again, he had brought us through the firestorm of battle. At the end of the day we were still alive and in the Imperial Guard that is all you can reasonably ask.

I offered up a prayer of thanks to the spirit of old Number Ten. The *Indomitable*, as much as the lieutenant, had brought us through the battle. No drives had failed at a critical moment, no guns had misfired. The armour had held. We still enjoyed the great beast's blessing. At the time, foolishly, I can recall thinking that maybe Macharius's presence on the Baneblade's side had blessed us too. Perhaps some of his luck, or the Blessing of the Emperor or whatever it was he had enjoyed had rubbed off on us too.

I wondered how much longer it could last.

It seemed I had barely closed my eyes when the lieutenant was barking orders at me. I glanced at the chronometer. A couple of hours had passed since I last looked. Even the stimm tabs had not been able to keep me awake. I glanced into the periscope. It was still night out. The infernal flames of the factorum towers still illuminated the area.

I looked down the long street and saw a number of small vehicles moving closer. Our guns spoke, tearing a huge crater out of the plascrete of the roadway as they destroyed the first of the oncoming Leman Russ. The others swerved around it and kept coming, fire blazing from their main turrets, belly mounted lascannon and side-sponson bolters. They were on killing ground. Our battle cannon swiftly reduced them to burned-out shells. Bailing out of their metal carapaces, their crews had no chance of survival in the wave of fire that descended on them.

While this was going on, heretic infantry had taken up position in the nearby buildings. They had set up their heavy weapons on balconies and along the external piping of the buildings where it was broad enough for scores of men to stand.

Among the troops, giving orders as if they were officers, were a number of robed and cowled figures. The thing that made them so visible was that someone seemed to have set fire to them. Around their heads flames rose, so bright and intense that they should have spread and burned but they did not. Instead they merely outlined their bearers like halos seen in religious

pictures.

‘Sir, have you seen this, the burning men?’ I said, just in case the lieutenant had not noticed.

‘They are priests of the Angel of Fire cult, Lemuel,’ the lieutenant said. There was an undercurrent of disquiet in his voice and I wondered if he, like me, was thinking about the cages we had seen with all those burned bodies within them.

‘Is it some sort of heretical trick, with the burning?’ the New Boy asked. It was a reasonable guess. Many times in my career fighting heretics I had seen very strange things that turned out to be products of some ancient dark technology

Before the lieutenant could reply one of the priests raised his hands. The aura of flame spread from his head to surround his entire body. It blazed up around his hands as if he was carrying a flamer. He made a gesture at the walls and waves of flame surrounded a squad of our troops, setting their uniforms alight and then consuming their flesh.

It was not the burning that was so horrific. I had seen many men burn to death before. It was the suggestion of something otherworldly about it, as if it were not just their bodies that were being consumed but their souls too. Some of our lads were shooting back, but their las-bolts simply disappeared when they hit the priest. The flaming shield surrounding him grew brighter as if it fed on their energy.

I think the horror of it left us paralysed for a moment. I was very glad I was within the ancient, warded hull of the *Indomitable* at that moment. The prospect of being outside and facing those burning zealots held no appeal whatsoever.

The priest spread his arms wider and his aura blazed ever brighter, twin columns of flame erupting from his back until it seemed as if he had wings of fire, as if he was becoming the living embodiment of the supernatural being he worshipped. He was a living flame, vibrant with a terrible power. The blaze of energy around him should have consumed those with him but it did not. It left the heretics untouched even as the fires he had invoked consumed our soldiers.

‘Enough,’ said the lieutenant savagely. ‘Antoniev, Saranin. Kill the bastard.’

Anton and Ivan did not need to be told twice. Our main guns sent an

enormous shell into the heretic position. It was overkill. Whatever protected the zealot from small arms fire, it was not enough to stop an explosion that could shatter a main battle tank. The whole vast web of piping the heretics perched on exploded, sending blazing, smashed bodies tumbling through the air to land on the ground below.

‘Keep firing till you have cleared the streets,’ said the lieutenant.

They did.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIVE

On the second day, curtains of heavy artillery fire descended upon us, smashing into our position, killing anyone who was not dug in deep. The soldiers brewing *chai* in the shadow of our tracks were reduced to a bloody smear on the stone. The outskirts of the factorum went from being an ordered, organised grid of plascrete walls to a smashed, desolate landscape as bleak and jumbled as the surface of some meteor-bombarded moon.

The Baneblade rocked on its treads as high-explosive shells rained down upon us. The noise was deafening and the sheer sound of the chaotic blasts would have driven you crazy. It was like being at the centre of an inferno of noise. A legion of devils beat on the armour with a thousand mighty hammers. Monsters roared outside the safe zone that the hull of the *Indomitable* represented.

A wall tipped on us, burying us beneath tons of shattered plascrete. It felt as if we were being trodden on by a giant. I put the drives into full reverse and the Baneblade shook off broken stone like a dog shakes off water as it emerges from a stream.

One by one, the towers surrounding us crumbled.

The first time it seemed impossible. One moment, there was a huge starscraper standing there. The next moment the earth shook and a cloud of dust erupted skywards. The whole huge structure slid into the ground – that’s the only way I can describe it. One moment the building was there and the next it had retracted into the plascrete leaving only a column of dust

and a pile of rubble the size of a small hill.

The heretics were destroying the buildings with demolition charges, clearing the ground for a massive counter-attack on the factorum zone. They had infiltrated them with combat engineers from the hive below. It showed how desperate and fanatical some of them were that they would consider doing such a thing. Those towers had been the homes of tens of thousands of people and had contained shops and schola and medicae and all the other things that people need to live. All were flattened at the whim of some commander somewhere who had decided that they represented an obstacle to his great plan being accomplished.

Where before we had looked out upon rows and rows of skyscraper towers, now we gazed upon great dunes of rubble across which we knew our enemies would soon attack.

The lieutenant had one hand on his earbead and glanced down at his tac-grid. I was looking into the periscope. Over the huge mounds of rubble created by the collapsing towers an enemy army approached. In the lead were Shadowswords, the greatest tank killers on the battlefield of the newborn 41st millennium, an enemy vehicle that filled me with dread. Around the Shadowswords were hundreds of Leman Russes and thousands of Chimeras, and around them were hordes and hordes of infantry. They were packed very closely. It was like watching a bloody-red tide come in. Their crimson uniforms made the oncoming heretics seem like a lake of blood puddling out from the corpse of a giant.

‘Lieutenant! Lieutenant!’ I said. ‘We’re under attack.’

He looked up from the tac-grid and spoke rapidly to whoever was on the other end of the comm-channel. After a few seconds he began to give orders to the gunners and he told me to hold myself ready.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen a larger force coming at me. I certainly had not up till that day. I had put the Bane-blade hull-down behind what was left of the factorum wall. There was only a small stretch still intact. The rest had been reduced to rubble by the constant bombardments. It was not much but it was much more than many of our comrades had. Most of the other tanks stood alone in the rubble around the factorum, providing such cover as there was for many of our infantry. The smarter soldiers had already taken up position among the collapsed walls and buildings.

‘Steady! Steady!’ the lieutenant said. His voice was unnaturally calm. I could tell he was thinking exactly what I was; that there was no way that we were going to survive this. We were outnumbered and outgunned by those oncoming Shadowswords and all their support. The enemy general who had planned this attack had known what he was doing. This was probably the weakest part of our defensive perimeter, the softest spot in our defensive line. He had aimed a hammer blow at the most vulnerable point. It was unfortunate for us that we just happened to be there.

The Shadowswords opened fire. One of the tanks next to us was hit by storm of super-heavy las-fire. Its turrets were crippled immediately. A beam penetrated the side armour. I don’t know what happened next. Possibly there was an internal fire or one of the drive cores overloaded. There was an enormous explosion and the main turret lifted right out of its mounting before tumbling to one side.

I have never seen a Baneblade quite so comprehensively destroyed. The fusillade of fire was overpowering even for one of these ancient monstrous tanks. All I could do was offer up thanks to the Emperor that we were partially concealed by the tumbled-down wall. I knew that we were next in line. Our own guns opened fire. The shells fell among the enemy. The destruction was enormous in that closely packed formation. Unfortunately, it did not touch the Shadowswords but no Leman Russ could withstand the impact of our main batteries, not when they were fired by gunners as accurate as Ivan and Anton and the others.

The poor infantrymen surrounding the tanks had no chance whatsoever – they were simply reduced to bloody jam smeared on the plascrete.

The enemy did not stop coming. The Shadowswords kept firing.

I kept my hands on the control sticks. I offered up prayers to the spirit of our great tank. I felt useless and helpless. There was nothing I could do. Instinct urged me to unlimber my combat shotgun, for I felt certain that if I survived the next few minutes, I was going to have some use for it.

The New Boy groaned. The Understudy was probably wetting himself. I kept my eyes focused on the enemy, willing them to die. If terror and hatred could form a lethal beam, I would have killed a few hundred just with my gaze. The enemy were not impressed by my attempt to use psychic powers. The lesser tanks were firing now and even a few of the infantry. Las-bolts flickered in our direction.

Some of our own soldiers had started to respond in kind. I could see one of their commissars rushing around, dust covering his normally immaculate uniform, bellowing orders and gesticulating frantically as he sought to get them to hold their fire. An explosion bloomed on the spot where he stood and he went to greet the Emperor in the company of the men he had been trying to lead.

It let me know in no uncertain terms that the Emperor was not with us that day.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIX

The enemy horde raced on, the tanks leaving the infantry behind now except where the footsloggers had scrambled up onto the hulls of the armoured vehicles. They had about them that certainty of victory that keeps men coming even in the face of near inevitable destruction.

Every one of those soldiers over there was convinced that somehow death would pass him by. It might tap the shoulder of his comrades but it would leave him alone. That and rotgut alcohol are the only two things I know that can be relied on to keep men walking forwards in the face of the sort of fire we laid down – those and maybe a stern-faced commissar standing behind them with a bolt pistol and a chainsword in his hand.

I could tell from the panicked chatter over the comm-net that our own forces did not possess such conviction. All of us knew that we were doomed. There simply was no place to run in the face of that oncoming wave of killer tanks and bloodthirsty soldiers. Our gunners fired like madmen, blowing huge holes in the enemy line. There was no way they could miss. There were just too many targets.

Tens of thousands of las-bolts hailed down on our position. Of course, they could do nothing to the *Indomitable* but it was like trying to peer into an incoming blizzard through the visor of a helmet. The *Indomitable* shuddered under near impact from incoming shells.

Another of our tanks brewed up. More men I had fought alongside for a decade died in the burning inferno it became. I waited and I waited. I

offered up more prayers. I hoped that the lieutenant would say something, anything. I hoped that he had a plan as he so often had in the past. All I can remember is that calm voice saying, ‘Steady lads. Steady!’ The smell of stale sweat and fear filled the cabin. My hands felt clammy on the sticks.

The Shadowswords started to target us with everything they had. At first the beams ploughed through the rubble around us, adding to the chaos of broken brick and plascrete.

Every time they missed I breathed a little easier, but I could tell that the shots were coming closer. They were starting to bracket us, and then it was only a matter of time before they got the range. Their gunners were not as good as ours but they would get there in the end.

I took a deep breath and fought down the urge to throw the Baneblade into reverse and try and get us out of there. Doing so would just get me a bullet in the back of the head.

Anton and Ivan kept firing. They hit one of the Shadowswords and immobilised it. A moment later something else hit it and sent its crew to hell. I heard cheering over the internal comm-net. It was a small victory but our gun crews felt the need to celebrate it.

The next moment the *Indomitable* shook. We had been hit although I had no idea how badly. I heard the lieutenant bark some questions. He wanted reports from every part of the tank. Most of them came in but there was nothing from the drive rooms.

That was bad. If we lost all of our drives we would have no power. We would be unable to move. In the worst-case scenario, the servomotors on the guns would stop working and crews would need to crank everything by hand.

In quick succession we were hit three more times. It was as if we were inside an anvil and a giant was pounding on us. It was only afterwards, when I had time to think, that I realised that was the case. The shots were so close together and so powerful and the effect was so devastating that I did not have time while it was happening. One of the shots must have hit the tracks because afterwards I saw that they were torn to shreds. I know another hit one of our turrets and killed its entire crew. I was much more concerned by the effects of the third shot. I felt those personally.

The entire command chamber erupted in a blaze of light. The air was filled with the smell of ozone and melting fuse wire. My display went mad for a

moment and then dead.

Instinctively I tugged at the sticks but nothing happened so I looked over at the lieutenant, hoping for instructions. It was then that I saw the great gaping hole in the internal bulkhead where something had torn through it.

I saw also that the lieutenant was not going to be giving me any orders ever again. Whatever had smashed through durasteel had not been slowed down in the slightest by his mere flesh.

All that was left of the lieutenant was a torn corpse, a mess of entrails strewn across his commander's chair. His head lay where it had rolled on the far side of the cabin. Some quirk of fate had spared the Understudy. He stood there, horror-stricken, blood splattered on his beautiful uniform and on his face. His eyes were wide. His mouth was open. He seemed to be screaming and groaning at the same time.

I don't suppose he had expected to take over command of the Baneblade under quite these circumstances.

I listened on the comm-net but it was dead. I looked around to see if anybody was capable of giving orders. In my heart of hearts, I knew there wasn't but, such was the ingrained habit of looking to command for instructions, that I could not stop myself.

I unstrapped myself from my chair and tried to stand up but my legs would not respond to my brain's instructions. I looked down, half-fearing to see that they had been blown off but they were still there. They just refused to move.

I looked over at the New Boy. He was shaking his head as if he did not quite understand what had happened. He was feeling at the back of his skull, touching the dark stain there.

At first I thought that he had been hit, that his head had been broken open and something was leaking out. It took me a moment to realise that he was okay. It was simply that a chunk of meat had been thrown across the room as the lieutenant's body had been torn apart and had landed on him. It was mixed with blood and hair but he had not taken a scratch. I think he came to that conclusion at roughly the same time as I did.

I put my hands on the dashboard and pushed, raising myself up out of my seat. My legs decided to work again and I managed to stand upright, swaying dizzily. I staggered over to the Understudy and began to shake him. There was an odd madness in his eyes and he was still making that

strange sound.

I don’t think he was entirely there. I think his spirit had gone somewhere else for the duration. I slapped him on the cheek. It did not bring him out of it. I would have thought if anything could have, that would. The upper classes on Belial were not used to being struck by their social inferiors.

He just kept staring at me and staring at me. I looked over at New Boy. He seemed to be waiting for instructions and it came to me that right at this moment in time, I was in charge.

Warning lights strobed redly through the inside of the tank. Alarm horns sounded. I unslung my shotgun and strode over to the breach in the hull. I looked out and saw that we were surrounded by the enemy. They just seemed to be there, as if somehow they had crossed the distance between us and where they had been instantly.

I realised then that some time had passed since we were hit and I simply had not grasped that fact. Such things often happen in the chaos of combat. You never get used to them. I smelled burning and I saw black smoke rising above the hull of the Baneblade. I noticed that the escape hatches near number one turret were open and Anton and Ivan had clambered out along with one of their loaders. I could not tell who in the gloom.

Such is the size of a Baneblade that I was actually a long way above the ground with a clear view of the enemy soldiers below us and the enemy Shadowswords passing close by.

They were just as huge and much more menacing. Perhaps for the first time in my life I truly realised exactly how terrifying a main battle tank can be as it passes. You feel completely insignificant compared to that vast monstrosity and you just know that with the slightest sweep of its smallest weapon it could extinguish your life like an officer treading on the stub of a lho stick.

Even as I watched, a small anti-personnel turret on the side of the Shadowsword began to rotate. I shouted a warning to Ivan and Anton and pulled my head back inside the gaping hole in the *Indomitable*’s side. Bolter shells bounced off the iron walls outside. Some of them passed through the gaping hole in the hull. Something ricocheted around the interior of the command chamber and I dived for cover instinctively.

When I heard voices outside speaking the guttural accent of Irongrad I knew the enemy soldiers had started clambering up the hull of our

Baneblade. The anti-personnel fire had stopped. More time had passed without me realising it. I think I was in shock.

I could hear the enemy coming closer and closer. I turned and saw that New Boy was standing beside the Understudy, trying to get him to say something, but nothing was happening. I turned and shouted at them, ‘Get into cover! Now! Get out of here!’

He looked at me as if he did not quite understand what I was saying. I brought my combat shotgun around and he flinched as anyone will when a weapon is pointed at them by someone of whose intentions he is not sure. ‘Go!’

At that moment, a soldier in brownish-red uniform clambered through the hole in the metal wall. He saw me at once and began to swing his lasgun towards me. I turned and fired. The shotgun spoke in a voice of thunder. The kick of the weapon almost dislocated my shoulder.

The heretic screamed and fell backwards, tumbling to the ground far below, carried back out through the hull-breach by the force of the shotgun blast. His blood stained the floor. More heads poked through the gap. I pumped the shotgun and fired again then I dived behind what was left of the command throne, almost slipping on the lieutenant’s slimy remains.

The knees of my trousers were sticky. My hands were red too. I did not really have time to consider the implications of this. The New Boy had taken the Understudy and disappeared through the internal hatch.

Smoke billowed along the corridor and through it and for the first time I wondered if I had done the right thing ordering him to run. In the depths of the Baneblade fires were raging and smoke can be as deadly as poison gas under the wrong circumstances. I told myself that he had his rebreather and that he knew how to use it but I was not entirely certain that under the circumstances he would remember to do so.

Even as that thought occurred to me, I realised that I had not adjusted my own mask. I pulled the rebreather into position and immediately it flattened out the stink of torn-apart bodies and burned control systems.

I adjusted my goggles and squinted at the door again, half-wishing and half-dreading that the heretics would appear again. A kind of madness descended upon me, filling me with bloodlust. It’s not that I lost all fear – it was more that I knew that death would put an end to the terror clawing at my gut and so I feared it less.

I waited and I waited and no one came.

I heard footsteps clattering in the corridor behind me and I turned, half-expecting to see the New Boy again but it was Ivan and Anton. They were dragging the loader along with them. He was pale and had lost a lot of blood and it seemed obvious that he had been hit by a bolter shell. With both hands he was holding his stomach and I could see the pink squirming thing that was one of his intestines trying to escape from between his fingers. Even as I watched, he coughed and what seemed like a river of blood gushed from his mouth. He slumped to the floor, clearly dead.

Ivan and Anton held their lasguns at the ready. They looked just as prepared to shoot me as I was prepared to shoot them at the moment.

'It's Leo,' Ivan said, 'don't shoot!'

'That would be nice,' I said idiotically. 'If you don't shoot me, I won't shoot you.'

'Excellent plan,' said Ivan.

'I do my best,' I said.

'Is that the...' asked Anton. I nodded.

'It's the lieutenant.'

'He deserved better,' said Ivan.

'We all do,' I said. 'But I doubt we'll get it.'

'I thought I saw some of the heretics climbing the side of the tank,' Ivan said.

'You did,' I said. I patted the barrel of my shotgun. 'My friend here discouraged them from entering uninvited.'

'It's good to have a friend like that,' said Ivan.

'Cover me,' I said. 'I'm going to take a look around.'

I took a couple of steps and threw myself flat where there was less blood and then I wriggled forwards on my belly towards the hole in the hull wall. When I got there I looked out and surveyed the battlefield. The man I had shot lay on the ground below me. Another had been run over by a tank. You could tell by the tread marks on his belly. What was left of our Baneblade was a metal island rising out of a sea of heretics.

We were on our own, I realised, surrounded by our enemies. I did not see any way we were going to get out of this.

All around us I could see the heretics. There were hundreds of tanks and

tens of thousands of soldiers surging past. Most of them paid not the slightest attention to the broken-down Baneblade in their midst. They were too busy concentrating on the factorum zones ahead. They had their eyes on the objective they had been sent to retake.

I felt utterly insignificant. It did not seem as if I was even worth killing.

I noticed in the ranks of the enemy there were many priests with halos of flame. They seemed to take the same position in the heretic's army as commissars held in our own. I saw them exhorting the soldiers and threatening them and when one of them looked up at me I got back out of sight certain that the worst thing I could do would be to attract the attention of such a fanatic.

Anton and Ivan threw themselves down next to me and peeked out over the edge of the breach in the hull.

'Bloody hell,' said Anton. 'It's like there's an army down there.'

He grinned a cheesy grin and unclipped a grenade and dropped it over the side of the tank. It fell amid the heretics and exploded, killing a dozen of them. The unbelievers looked around, unable to understand what had happened. Perhaps they thought they were under artillery fire. Perhaps they thought that some distant tank was shooting at them. I could cheerfully have just lain there and let the heretics pass by but the two madmen I was with were not prepared to do that.

Ivan grunted and threw a grenade of his own. He tossed it further and it landed beside a Leman Russ. The explosion ricocheted off the side of the tank, leaving it unscathed, but killing more heretics. Ivan laughed and Anton giggled and I cursed the pair of them for being idiots.

They did not care. I think they had already decided that they were dead and they were just going to take as many of the heretics with them as they could. It had all become a big childish game to them. I did not know whether to laugh or cry.

At that moment, all I really wanted to do was keep living for another few heartbeats. I looked up at the sky. For once there was a hole in the clouds above us and I could see a patch of pure reddish-blue. The sun was shining through it and briefly I saw the contrail of some aircraft passing at high altitude. It was an incongruously peaceful sight in the midst of that vast assault.

Anton threw another grenade. Then Ivan did the same. They kept doing it

and they kept laughing and there was something contagious about their mad mirth in the middle of all that death so I joined in.

Of course, it was only a matter of time before the heretics realised what was happening. Someone in the turret of a passing Leman Russ tank noticed us and turned the heavy bolter on us. We barely had time to duck back out of sight. Sparks flashed off the edge of the hull. Then I heard shouts below us and I knew that the enemy were starting to clamber up the side of the Baneblade again.

‘Now you’ve done it,’ I said. I sounded just like my father at that moment. The pair of idiots had known my old man and they flinched at my tone. My father had been a famously violent man in his day and some of that came out in me sometimes.

We scuttled away across the command chamber, jumping over the loader’s corpse, trying to find some cover from the attack that we knew was incoming. There was no place to hide in the corridor and the smell of burning was becoming more intense. We scuttled back along the way Anton and Ivan had come and clambered up the metal ladder, making our way to the top of the Baneblade.

I’m not exactly sure why we did it. There was no escape. The heretics would eventually catch us. Perhaps it was pure instinct, trying to keep ourselves alive for just that little bit longer. Or perhaps it was simply part of the childish game that Ivan and Anton were playing, sort of like hide and seek, forcing the enemy to come and find us, wasting their time as much as possible. It was probably some mixture of the two.

Eventually we clambered up through the topside hatch and emerged on the roof of the Baneblade. We were a long way above ground, out of the arc of fire of the heretics. There was plenty of cover along the top of the tank.

‘We can drop grenades on them when they try and climb up,’ said Anton. He smiled again and there was madness in his smile. He was like a child being too clever. On the other hand, I could not think of anything else to do.

‘And then what?’ I asked. Anton shrugged.

‘And then we die,’ Ivan said.

‘At least we’ll take a few of them with us,’ Anton said. ‘And that’s all a soldier of the Emperor can ask for!’

He had read too many prop-novs. Still, I could not fault his logic. I heard voices below us. I smelled smoke. Looking out from the top of the tank, all

I could see was enemies as far as the horizon.

It was like standing on top of a huge durasteel cliff looking down on a sea of hostile flesh. I took a deep breath, offered up another prayer to the Emperor, checked my shotgun and, for a mad moment, considered throwing myself off the edge of the tank with a live grenade in each hand. After all, what did it matter whether I did that now or got fried by lasgun fire in a few minutes? The desire to live for those few extra minutes stopped me but it was touch and go.

Ivan looked at us both. He scanned from face to face. There was no expression on his ruined metal features but I thought there was a certain sadness in his glance. ‘Well then, I guess this is it. You’re a pair of sad bastards but I’m glad to have known you.’

Anton gave him a salute and then looked up and squinted at something in the sky. ‘What the hell is that?’ He asked.

I followed Anton’s gaze. Hundreds of objects dropped out of the sky. I was not exactly sure what they were. They did not seem connected in any way to what was going on round about us. I noticed something else. In the distance, behind us, absolutely monstrous figures were striding out from behind the skyscraper towers that our forces still held.

‘What in the name of the Emperor?’ Ivan said. There was awe in his voice.

‘Are those what I think they are?’ Anton asked.

‘I’m pretty sure they are,’ I said. They were like animated statues, perhaps a hundred times the height of a man, made of dura-steel and ancient alloys. They moved with a massive, lumbering grace. They were ancient god-machines produced by the Adeptus Titanicus, perhaps the most powerful war engines ever built and I wondered where they had come from. It was only then that the size and power of the force that Macharius had assembled really began to sink in. And that was not all; the things dropping out of the sky began to hit the ground all around us and what was in them broke out in a whirlwind of violence.

They were drop-pods and within them were Space Marines of the Death Spectres Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes. They were massive, armoured men, moving almost too fast for the eye to see. They smashed their way through the oncoming heretics and it did not matter that they were facing tanks and were outnumbered perhaps ten thousand to one. Where they struck, their enemies died. Bolters coughed in their hands and blasted holes

in heretics. Chainswords decapitated enemies two or three at a time.

We did not have long to watch the violence. Our own enemies were coming closer from below.

‘It was all a trap,’ I said, thinking out loud. Ivan saw it at once. Anton, as ever was a bit slower.

‘They left this part of the line weak,’ Ivan said. ‘They knew the heretics would attack here in force.’

It was easy enough to understand and even quite admirable if you did not happen to be the bait in the trap. A massive enemy force had been drawn into the counter-attack. It overextended itself as it came on, certain of victory. It punched a salient out of our line and then once it was entrapped, it was encircled on both flanks by our armour and the Space Marines dropped on it from above. I worked it all out as I stood there. It was typical of Macharius or those who had studied his methods like Sejanus. There were feints within feints, traps within traps. We had walked into what looked like a trap ourselves only to draw our enemies into a bigger one. Maybe Macharius had not been quite so open with us as I had thought back when he was giving his speech from the side of the *Indomitable*.

Suddenly Anton shouted, ‘Look out!’

A grenade arced up through the open hatch and we dived for cover. I scrambled into place behind an anti-personnel turret and heard shrapnel ping off the metal. When I looked up I could see heretics scrambling out of the hatch. One was already up. Another had just popped his head out. I blasted with the shotgun. I took the top heretic’s leg off at the knee and put multiple holes in his friend’s head. Ivan and Anton’s lasgun made sure of them.

‘Shit,’ I heard Anton say and looking up I saw why. While we had been busy at this hatch more of the enemy had emerged from the other topside hatches. We shared the roof of the Baneblade with at least a dozen heretics, and more and more were emerging all the time. Our situation had gone from bad to worse.

I hunkered down behind my cover and pumped the shotgun. Anton lay flat behind a small raised seam of metal. Ivan raced across the duralloy, las-bolts burning at his heels, and dropped into place beside me.

‘They’ve fallen into our trap,’ he said. His voice was flat because of his metal jaw-work and his metal-plated face had no expression but there was a

grim humour in the set of his eyes.

‘Yeah, we’ve got them where we want them now.’

A grenade dropped into place between his feet. Without the slightest hesitation, he picked it up and lobbed it back. It must have been at the end of its timer because it burst while it was still in the air.

Heretics screamed.

I popped up and blasted with the shotgun. The enemy were closer than I had expected. At that range it was impossible for me to miss. The leader went down, his chest a bloody ruin.

A grenade landed among them. Half a dozen of them were caught in the blast. The nearest ones fell clutching ruined faces and chests. One or two had been shielded by their comrades’ bodies. They kept coming. In one glance I took in the sheer number of heretics. There were just too many of them to be overcome.

And then it happened.

Something big landed on the hull of the Baneblade. It was huge and not unlike an egg and it crushed half a dozen heretics beneath its weight. Even as it began to slide off the hull, its sides burst open like one of those magical mechanical toys shops used to sell when I was a child. Massive armoured men erupted out of it. They moved much too fast for me to follow them. Bolters fired, weapons far larger than any mortal man ought to be able to carry. Where the shells hit, and they always hit, the target seemed simply to explode in a welter of blood and bone and flesh. Chain-swords swung. The great egg fell off the Baneblade but I know for a fact that none of the men who had ridden it down from orbit were still in it. They were all with us on the Baneblade.

The remaining heretics looked just as astonished as we were for a few seconds. Those seconds were all they had left of life. The armoured figures smashed into them. One of them was lifted by the throat one-handed by one of the armoured giants and simply tossed away, dropping from the side of the Baneblade legs flailing. When he hit the ground below, he exploded, skull shattering, body reduced to shambles. Somehow, without me seeing it, the newcomer had slammed a grenade into his mouth before he fell. It was an action guaranteed to inspire terror in the heretics witnessing it and that was the intention.

When I looked back, the whole area around the newcomers was clear.

Bodies were piled at their feet, limbless, headless, broken-backed and broken-boned. One man howled wordlessly as he flopped, his spine shattered. One of those massive armoured boots descended on his head, turning it to jelly.

Anton just stood there with his mouth open as if he was trying to catch flies in it. Ivan tilted his head to one side and studied them. I did the same, not exactly sure that what I was seeing was real.

They were big men, bigger than me by a long way, and their ceramite armour made them look bigger still. It was painted glossy black. White skull patterns were painted on their helmets. A similar pattern was emblazoned in white warpaint on the black face of the giant warrior facing us. I flinched for a moment as he raised his boltgun and fired. The shot passed between my legs and I heard a groan. I turned and looked and saw the heretic who had been sneaking up on me. How the Space Marine had known he was there in the chaos and having just sprung out of the drop-pod I will never know. How they had avoided killing us in the opening few seconds of the carnage I will never know either. If it had been me, I would just have shot everything in sight, but somehow in the heartbeat between evacuating the damaged drop-pod and entering the fire-fight, they had managed to tell friend from foe and killed every enemy, and spared our lives.

‘Thanks,’ I said stupidly.

The Death Spectre grunted what might have been an acknowledgment and then leapt off the side of the Baneblade, plunging into the heretics below. If I had tried that I would have broken both legs. He landed, weapons firing, and blazed a bloody path towards the priest with the burning head. When I looked back, all of those other massive armoured figures were gone, the only evidence they had been there being the piles of the dead.

‘It’s a bloody miracle,’ I muttered.

‘Space Marines,’ Anton said.

‘Macharius must have sent them to get you, Anton,’ said Ivan. Somehow, in the face of the awful reality, the joke fell flat.

The Death Spectres fanned out from their drop point, killing the psykers it turned out were concentrated all around us. Tanks did not slow the Space Marines down. They clambered up on to them, ripped off durasteel hatches as if they were made of paper and dropped grenades into the interior.

Sometimes they dropped in afterwards themselves and there would be sounds of awful violence and moments later a Death Spectre would emerge covered in gore. It was terrifying to watch. I have made war alongside hardened veterans, done more than my share of killing. I have fought orks and daemon-worshippers and monstrous xenos things and I would rather face any ten of those again than one soldier of the Adeptus Astartes.

They moved with a terrible combination of efficiency and ferocity that was oddly graceful. I saw a heretic sniper taking a bead on one of them from the top of a burned-out tank. He was too far away for my shotgun to hit. I shouted a warning but I was certain it could not be heard through the roar of battle. Just as it seemed he was about to be shot, the Space Marine raised his gun in a casual motion and blew the top of the heretic's head away. From the position in which he was standing you would have sworn he could not have seen his target take aim and he did not even seem to look in his direction, merely pointed his bolter and fired then returned to killing the heretics closer to him. The shot was uncannily accurate for the range.

An enormous shadow fell on our position. The gigantic humanoid shape of a Warlord Titan loomed over us. I looked up, an insect confronting an angry god. The Warlord's monstrous head scanned from side to side like a predator looking for prey. I sensed the ancient, terrible spirit within it. This was not some inanimate unthinking engine. It was a living thing, bred to war, intended to kill, and full of dreadful fury. Just the sight of it made me want to throw myself back into the wreckage and hide.

Massive pistons hissed in the Titan's limbs as it moved. The god-machine's huge Volcano Cannon swung around. The rush of the air it displaced ruffled my hair. The vibrations of the metal giant's stride passed from the earth through the shattered hull and echoed through my body. My skin tingled from the halo effect of its void shields.

The Titan fired.

The smell of ozone and alchemicals filled the air. The high-pitched whine of the weapon's capacitors hurt my ears. I ground my teeth in pain. A heretic Shadowsword went up in flames. There is ancient hatred between the god-machines and those tanks. It is said that the Shadowswords were built to kill Titans and the Titans return the favour any chance they get.

Ivan braced himself on a maintenance node in the shattered fuselage, pulled out his magnoculars and studied the destroyed vehicle, a thin line of

drool dribbling down the rusted metal of his prosthetic jaw.

‘See anything interesting?’ Anton asked.

‘There’s an idiot standing beside me,’ Ivan said.

‘It’s not nice to talk about Leo that way,’ Anton said. ‘Best be quiet or he’ll hear you and he has a shotgun.’

That’s the way I like to remember them, chattering like loons while all around us what felt like the end of the world raged.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVEN

The battle stalked away from us. The Titans, our reinforcements and the Death Spectres tore through the heretics like a sandstorm stripping an unprotected man to the bone. We watched them killing as they went. They took no prisoners. They did not have the time. That was left to the Imperial Guard regiments who followed up. It's not glamorous but it beats getting your head shot off.

We were left alone on top of the tank, looking at the piles of broken bodies and heaps of destroyed armour around us. Anton produced a flask of coolant fluid and we shared swigs.

'Bloody hell, Space Marines,' Anton said. 'We saw Space Marines. They saved us.'

From the tone of his voice it might just as well have been the Emperor himself descended from the Golden Throne to save our lives. I understood that. Very few men in all the worlds of the Imperium can say they have stood in a Space Marine's shadow or even talked to one, however briefly.

You hear about them. You hear their praises sung. You never expect to meet one. Somehow all of the stories had not prepared us for the reality.

Ivan took another swig and gazed into the distance. He was thinking about the experience, I could tell, but like me he was still trying to digest it among all the other events of the day.

Anton cackled and said, 'We saw Space Marines today. They saved us.'

'I noticed,' I said.

‘You think they noticed us?’ he asked. His eyes narrowed and his brow furrowed. The scar tightened on his forehead. I was surprised that he sounded so serious.

‘Well, they did not shoot us,’ I said.

‘I mean did they even see us as people? Will they remember us and think, yeah, we saved those Guardsmen on Karsk?’

I thought about the fierce, savage face of the Death Spectre. I remembered the controlled, killing fury in those cold, black eyes. I remembered the way he had grunted when I spoke to him. ‘The Emperor’s Angels’ I have heard the Space Marine Chapters called. There seemed very little angelic about them to me. I thought Death Spectres an entirely appropriate name. They certainly looked like manifest death to me, and they had proved themselves to be to all those they encountered on the field of battle. Among all those bodies down there, among all the thousands of casualties, I had not seen one encased in ceramite armour.

‘I doubt it.’

Ivan nodded and scratched his metal cheek. It made a nerve-jangling grinding sound. ‘Like mortal gods,’ he said. ‘Like something out of Scripture come to life.’

He sounded uneasy and that too was understandable. It is all very well hearing legends and heroic tales. It is another thing to find one of those legends standing in front of you, wielding a bolter and filled with righteous fury. The uncomfortable thought sidled into my mind: what if the Death Spectre had decided I was one of the Emperor’s enemies? He would have killed me on the spot and there was absolutely nothing I could have done to stop him. Space Marines have a way of making you feel your mortal insignificance. I was glad they were on our side but I was not sure I wanted to be that close to one ever again.

Anton, as ever, chose to give voice to his own reveries. ‘You know I don’t think they are like us at all.’

‘They are certainly not like you,’ Ivan said.

‘I mean it. I think they have no more in common with us than orks do.’

‘That’s not true. They were men once, if the tales are true.’

‘Once, Leo. Not any more. I looked into one’s eyes. It was not like looking into a man’s eyes at all. And I don’t think he looked back at me and saw someone who was the same species as him. They say they live forever, you

know.’

‘They don’t. Just longer than us, if they are not shot.’

‘Yes, but they have a gene-seed in them that is passed on from one to another. That lives forever. Some of them must be carrying seeds that date back to when the Emperor walked among men.’

‘I don’t think I have ever seen you this thoughtful,’ I said. It was true too. Of all the strange and wonderful things I saw that day, a thoughtful Anton was not the least strange.

‘And… and those Titans, they were old too, old as the Imperium maybe. Some of them must have walked when the Emperor did and that Space Marine’s gene-seed was new. We live in a strange and terrible universe, Leo,’ he said.

‘It’s taken you all this time to work that out?’ I said.

He just stared at me bleakly, as if he was about to cry. There was a lost look about him, like a child separated from his parents in a hive-world crowd who does not know his way home. It was odd seeing those eyes looking out of that tall gangling body.

A strange gloom started to settle on us. I looked down at the armoured hull of the *Indomitable*. I knew at once we were all thinking the same thing.

I was the first to say it. ‘It’s dead.’

They understood what I meant. There was no sense of presence in the *Indomitable*. Whatever spirit had been in it was gone. Anton nodded. Ivan shook his head. They reflected the confusion of the moment.

There was the sound of gunfire and all the thunder of battle in the distance but it was as if we sat in our own small pool of quiet. We were all thinking about the Baneblade. Old Number Ten had carried us across half a dozen worlds. We had looked after it and it had looked after us. It had been in a very real sense the only home we had known in the past decade.

‘What are we going to do?’ Anton asked. They were both looking at me, in that hangdog way that they’d always done even back in the guild factorum on Belial.

‘We need to find an officer to report to,’ I said. None of us moved. A dying heretic started to scream for water. He lay in the shadow of a smashed Leman Russ across from us. Anton turned, raised his lasgun and put him out of his misery. We returned to contemplating our own problems.

‘There’s always the Understudy,’ I said. ‘He might still be alive. I suppose

we should look.’

It was something we had been putting off and I hated to bring it up but someone had to. We had to go back into the shattered remains of the Baneblade and start looking for bodies. I doubted that anyone had survived but it was always possible and we would need to account for the casualties anyway at some point if we were the only survivors. The Imperial Guard always has a great curiosity about such things. We would need to reclaim the logs as well. As surviving crew it was our sacred duty.

Anton gulped. He acted tough and he was, most of the time, but there are some things nobody likes to do and this was one of them. It was also the first time any of us had been called on to do such a thing. The old tank had seemed indestructible. I don’t think it was quite real to any of us just yet.

And there was something else, a certain inertia. While we were sitting here we were out of things. Nothing was quite real. We were alone in a world of ruins and dust and corpses, committed to nothing except watching the universe pass us by. Once we started doing something we were back in the world of following orders, performing duties, a world in which we could be killed and in which, at very least, we would have to work. For all our depression, there was still an odd holiday mood in the air. It came from still being alive and having no supervision and, for the first time in years, having no real idea of what to do.

Ivan grunted as he started to get up. ‘I suppose we have to,’ he said.

You could always rely on Ivan to bring you down.

‘Come on you two,’ he said. ‘We’ve got work to do.’

We clambered back down into the body of the *Indomitable*. We moved very cautiously, much more cautiously than when we had made our escape. There was something ominous about going back down there. It was as if we were rummaging about inside a huge corpse.

We were in the burned-out shell of something that had once been living but was now dead. I think all of us felt that way. They let me take the lead, quite wisely, because nobody really wants to stand in front of a man with a shotgun. Not if they have the slightest smidgen of a sense of self-preservation anyway.

I found that I was holding my breath again and walking on the balls of my feet. I was ready for anything – it was always possible that the Space

Marines might have missed someone and that there might be enemies still left alive down here.

We entered the command cabin again. None of us could look at the lieutenant. I paused there and looked at my old seat. How many hours had I spent sitting there? How many leagues had I driven that ancient tank over? One thing was for sure, I would not be doing that again in a hurry. It seemed like a different place now and I felt like a different person from the driver who had sat there taking orders from the lieutenant.

‘Nothing,’ said Anton, shaking his head. ‘No one here except the dead.’ No one made any jokes. Even for us some things were not a subject for humour.

‘I suppose we’re going to have to go below,’ said Ivan. Even he did not sound very keen on the idea. None of us were.

‘I suppose we are,’ I said. There were dead bodies in the corridor leading towards the engine room. They were heretics. They had that strange look, as if their chests or their heads had exploded from within, that is so characteristic of the corpses of those who have been shot with a bolter. There is nothing, with the possible exception of grenades, that leaves quite such a mess and I say this as a man who is quite proficient with a shotgun.

Our boots made a strange sucking sound as we walked. It was impossible to tread through the narrow corridor without stepping in blood and entrails. Something bad had happened in the drive room. It must have taken the first hit and it had been a nasty one. The engine had exploded and taken out the engineers. Oily had been beheaded by a slice of metal half the size of the door that had been blown off in the explosion. The rest of his team had been so badly chopped up that we could not really work out which body parts belonged to which person.

‘It looks like we were lucky,’ said Anton. ‘I’m not sure anybody else made it out of here alive.’

Of course at that point we heard a groan from down the corridor. We pushed down to the head and banged on the door and the groaning stopped. ‘Who’s in there?’

‘Yeah, let us in, I need to use the head,’ said Anton.

‘Is that you, Leo?’ I heard the New Boy ask.

‘No! It’s Lord High Commander Macharius, come to offer you a promotion,’ I said. ‘What the hell do you think?’

The door swung open. Crammed into the tiny space of the toilet were the New Boy and the Understudy. They both looked pale and ill. They blinked at us like some nocturnal thing caught in the beam of a torch. The New Boy looked at us and then was violently sick. I stepped back just in time to avoid having vomit added to all the other gunk on my boots.

'What happened?' New Boy asked. 'I heard shooting – some sort of gun I have not heard before – and then nothing.'

'You missed the Space Marines,' Anton said. 'They saved us.'

'Space Marines,' said the New Boy.

'Yes,' said Anton. 'Those were bolters you heard.' He sounded as satisfied as if he had been firing them himself.

'That's all very well but we need orders,' I said. I looked pointedly at the Understudy. He just stared at me. I suppose having your superior's brains blasted over your face will do that to you. That said, the New Boy had had the same experience and he seemed to be handling it. It seemed to me at the time the Understudy really had not been a product of the same school as the lieutenant. Just goes to show how wrong a man can be.

'Are any of the others alive?' the New Boy asked. It was a sensible question but Anton turned and spat on the floor.

'That's what we are trying to find out,' he said. He looked in disgust at the Understudy. The man just stared at him blankly.

Ivan said, 'Best get him out of here. I doubt the air down here is helping him recover.'

His words were almost kindly. There was that thing about Ivan. Just when you thought with a fair degree of certainty that he was a brute, he surprised you with his sensitivity. He had been the same as a boy back on Belial but his ruined face and metal-plated skull made me forget that sometimes.

I nodded. 'We'll all go,' I said. 'Just in case there are a few heretics left over.'

We stepped out into the fresh air, if that was the right word for it. It had some of the tang of the desert in it but it was also the air of a hive city, full of trace chemicals and the stink of heavy industry. Added to that was the taint of the dust of fallen buildings and the smell of explosive and burned flesh and burned-out machinery. Not even the filters of rebreathers could extract every trace of all of that.

I looked around. There were bodies everywhere, like in some of those religious paintings showing the Day of Judgement when the Emperor returns to pass sentence on the Guilty. Some of the bodies were still moving, with the faint pathetic shifts of posture that men slowly dying of thirst, air poison and terminal wounds make. Most of them were in the uniforms of heretics. I told myself I had no sympathy with them, that they had been trying to kill me only a few hours before, but, of course, it is never that simple.

There was one young boy lying there. There did not seem to be anything wrong with him except for the red stain spreading across the chest of his tunic. His face was very pale and he licked his lips when he saw me. He was frightened and he wanted to ask for something at the same time. I tried to ignore him and walk past.

'Wait,' he said. He was speaking Low Gothic. The local accent distorted the word but it was recognisable. Something made me turn to face him. 'Drink. Please.'

I looked him in the eye. He was very young, even younger than the New Boy, younger than I had been when me, Ivan and Anton had run away to join the Guard. He held my gaze evenly. Who knew what he was really seeing? He had that visionary look that some of the dying get. I've seen it a thousand times. A man gets past a certain point and he just lets go. Indifference and a certain sympathy battled in my mind. I stuck out my hand. It surprised me to see there was a canteen in it.

'Thank. You.' He took a swig and lay back. He was dead before his head hit the ground. I wondered whether the act of drinking had killed him.

'You going soft, Leo?' Anton asked. He still looked thoughtful but the hint of his usual maniacal grin turned the corner of his lip up.

'One day that might be me,' I said. 'Or you.'

'Nah,' he said. 'I am planning on living forever.'

'The Guard might have something to say about that.'

'I know. They have their stupid plan to get us killed at every chance they can, but we are too smart for them.'

'Anton, you could not outsmart that rock.'

'I am still smarter than the Imperial Guard.'

'You may be on to something there.'

'You know it.' He bent over and closed the young boy's eyes.

‘They are not so different,’ he said. Somehow I could tell he was still thinking about the Space Marine. I think what he had realised that day had really shocked him. All his life he had idolised Space Marines. There had been a day when he thought he could become one.

‘You still want to be a Space Marine?’ I asked. He stared off at the rising dust clouds in the distance for a long time before he turned and grinned at me.

‘Hell, yeah,’ he said. ‘Put in a good word for me with Lord High Commander Macharius.’

‘I will when I see him,’ I said. At the time, I thought it was a joke.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHT

We squatted beside the burned-out shell of the Baneblade, listening to the Understudy mumble to himself and keeping our weapons close at hand just in case. It was quiet where we were but the thunder of battle muttered on in the distance. Sometimes the earth shook and I wondered what had happened. The New Boy rummaged about inside the tank for a while, then I heard his voice.

'Hey, Leo?' He peeked out from beneath the belly of the Baneblade. He gestured for me to come follow him. I considered shouting at him but the fun was fast fading from that so I crawled underneath the corpse of the old monster and saw what he wanted me to see.

Corporal Hesse was there. At first I thought he was a goner but I saw his chest was rising and falling and it took me a moment to realise he was asleep. I moved closer and noticed the open maintenance hatch above him. He must have crawled through it and just waited out the fire-fight raging above and around him.

Asleep though he was, he had a lasgun near at hand so I gestured for New Boy to come away. You can have some truly terrible accidents when you wake an armed man suddenly.

'What you find under there?' Ivan asked as I crawled back out.

'Corporal Hesse – the fat bastard is snoring away under the maintenance hatch.'

'Good for him,' Ivan said. He whistled as he did to show when he was

pleased. Anton smiled as well. I think he was just happy that there would be another familiar face about. I was happy that my brief period as a figure of authority was over.

Even as that thought occurred to me, I felt the earth shake and heard the rumble and clank of a massive machine coming closer. Turning, I saw it was a huge multi-sectioned transporter. A horde of smaller vehicles followed in its wake, mostly Atlas recovery tanks with the crane attachment. Some of them had bulldozer blades attached to their modified Leman Russ chassis. Loping around them were Sentinel power lifters, little bi-pedal hounds snapping at the heels of their tracked masters. They pulled up next to our position. It took about a minute for the cloud of dust to settle.

I caught the whiff of technical incense and sanctified grease. I heard the plainsong chants that the tech-adepts repeat to themselves even when they are not performing their rituals. They had come to see which tanks could be repaired and which they would need to perform the last rites on.

‘Red cowls,’ said Ivan. The Adeptus Mechanicus and their devotion to their ancient mysteries always made him nervous, had done ever since he had the mechanical parts added to his face. I think maybe he thought the devotees of the Omnissiah might want to salvage them some day. He was probably right but they would likely wait until he was dead. On second thoughts, I can see why he found their presence disturbing.

A few of the adepts clambered down from their vehicles. In their power armour, with their cowls and face masks they looked more like Space Marines than members of the Imperial Guard. At least, they did until they moved in that lumbering way of theirs. They had none of the deadly grace of the Adeptus Astartes. They moved more like the clockwork wind-up toys my mother had bought me before the sickness took her when I was a kid.

They stepped up to the wrecked Baneblade, looked at it and shook their heads. Their leader stared at me as if the destruction of the ancient tank was somehow my fault.

‘Who is ranking here?’ their chieftain asked. I indicated the Understudy with a jerk of my thumb. The enginseer made that weird clicking noise they use to indicate disapproval.

‘He is malfunctioning,’ he said. ‘Where is the fallback control?’

‘That would be Corporal Hesse,’ I said.

‘And where would I find this unit?’

‘Carrying out an inspection under the main chassis,’ I said.

‘Such is not his prerogative.’

‘That is a matter you should take up with him.’

‘I will.’ One of the adepts produced a small tracked trolley from within the Atlas. He placed it on the ground and the chief lay down on it. At a command in technical dialect it carried him flat on his back to where Hesse was. A few moments later he and the corporal were in heated discussion.

The rest of the tech-adepts moved around the wreckage. They paid as much attention to the heretic vehicles as they did to our own, which felt subtly wrong, until I realised they were looking for salvage and what they could strip down for parts. They walked around wrecks, banged them with massive, ceremonial spanners, chanting diagnostic catechisms and consulting with their portable divinatory altars.

Once the basic rituals had been performed, they marked some of the less damaged vehicles with reclamation sigils. The rest they began to strip. Soon I saw sparks flying from welding cutters. It reminded me of the guild factorum back on Belial.

Corporal Hesse emerged from beneath the Baneblade. He looked as if he was almost in tears. I would not have believed it myself if I had not seen it.

He indicated the chief with a nod of his head. ‘They are going to perform the last rites on Number Ten,’ he said, ‘then they are going to drag him away for reclamation.’

It did not surprise me. It meant the tech-adepts thought the martial spirit had definitely fled from the old tank. It would be sent back to one of the Temple factorums and be imbued with a new one if that was possible, broken up for parts if it was not.

‘He wants me to surrender the logbooks,’ Hesse said. He made it sound as if they were asking him to give up his first-born child.

‘I suppose we’d better go and get them then,’ I said. It was not something I was looking forward to. Of course, I had known I was going to have to at some point but it meant going back into the control cabin of the Baneblade once again.

Corporal Hesse nodded. He was going to go and get them himself but he looked as if he would be grateful for the company. I climbed up into the *Indomitable* with him. The control cabin did not smell any better. I wondered whether they were going to remove the bodies themselves or

whether they expected us to do so. I guessed it would be the latter – if there's a dirty job needs doing it's always the poor bloody Guard that needs to do it. It's a universal law.

Hesse looked at the lieutenant – it was the first time he had seen the body. He made an aquila over his heart and turned and looked away and if I had not known better, I would have sworn there was a tear in his eye. I did not look any closer than I had to. I walked over to the lieutenant's body and I rummaged around until I found his keys. I will spare you the details of exactly what was needed to extricate them from the decomposing mess that was his corpse.

I walked over to the locker and opened it and removed the large leather-bound books I found in it. I raised them reverently, knowing that these were the last in a long line of volumes dating back to when the first commander took charge of this vehicle after it emerged from the Temple factorum.

Curiosity forced me to open one.

I started with the pages towards the back and noticed that they were all in the lieutenant's fine handwriting. There was nothing particularly thrilling about the text. Mostly it seemed to be descriptions of maintenance routines, notes about how far we had travelled and similar such stuff. Even so, just looking at some of it made me nostalgic. I saw one passage noting the death of Henrik on Jurasik. I noticed the names of several old battles we had fought in. Just the words made me think about them. I found that I had a lump in my throat and I swiftly leafed through the book towards the beginning. The handwriting changed many times and the dates stretched back over decades then centuries.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and I turned around to see Corporal Hesse standing there with his hands held out. I handed the book over to him and he took it reverently and he muttered some words over it as if he was a tech-priest performing some sacerdotal ritual.

Of course, it was just gibberish he had picked up back on Belial the same as the rest of us. He was no more a tech-priest than I. And yet, at that moment, for all the difference it made, he might as well have been a member of one of the sacred orders. He spoke with just as much devotion. There was something touching about it and I did feel as if I was in the presence of something holy just for a moment.

The moment passed and we clambered back down out of the Baneblade

and, reluctantly, Corporal Hesse handed the logbooks over to the chief. He accepted them formally with all the ceremony of someone performing a high religious duty. He turned and he handed them to one of his minions and then he requested that we remove the bodies for burning so that he could, in turn, purify the Baneblade for its long journey back to its eternal home.

There was not a lot left of the lieutenant and many of the others were heavily mutilated. We piled their corpses together with those of the heretics, bodies mixed with anything inflammable that we could find. We threw technical oil over the whole damned mess and lit it with a lho stick igniter.

It seemed somehow appropriate that the worshippers of the Angel of Fire should be consumed by flame. Even as that thought struck me, I felt vaguely disturbed by it. The flames ate their flesh hungrily and sometimes I thought I saw small, snarling faces looking out of the fire. Corporal Hesse spoke the words of the funeral ritual, commending their souls to the Emperor's Light. We stood staring into the fire for ages afterwards, despite the stink of burning meat. We were thinking about the dead we had known and remembering them. I even remembered the boy I had given a drink of water.

Where did they go, I wondered? What really happens when the life goes out of us? The Texts tell us that our souls walk into the Emperor's Light, but do they? I have been on many worlds and seen and heard many things and I do not know if I believe that any more. Perhaps I never truly did.

One or two of the tech-adepts joined in the ritual, more from curiosity it seemed than for any reason of sentiment or belief. Perhaps I do them wrong. Or perhaps they were simply being diplomatic. While we saw to the empty shells of our fallen comrades, they did the same for the vehicles. Sometimes out of the corner of my eye I saw them performing their rituals with the same care that we did.

For a brief moment, the oddness of it struck me. I felt as lost and alone as I sometimes did as a child. I was standing amid the rubble of a burned-out hive city breathing the strange air of a world unimaginably far from the planet where I had been born. All around me men were performing rituals that had been old when my home-world was first colonised.

Near at hand were the corpses of those whose souls were about to take a

journey beyond all comprehension. By the light of burning bodies, amid the shadows of ancient war machines, I saw the rapt faces of Ivan and Anton and the New Boy and Hesse and I felt something, a closeness that I cannot find the words to describe even now.

Amid the ancient darkness and gloom, I felt the comradeship the living have in the face of the immeasurable dead. We were all tiny sparks of light, like those rising from the flames of that pyre and disappearing into the unknowable darkness.

Sometime after the funeral ceremony, the Understudy stopped gibbering. The light of intelligence returned to his eyes.

'Water,' he said. His voice was strange and rasping as if all those hours of making that inhuman sound had damaged his vocal cords. His face was grim. I am not sure what had happened to him. It was as if during the long madness of that day his spirit had left his body and something new and darker had crept in. When he looked at me, there was a feral insanity in his eyes, well-concealed but present.

I handed him the canteen and he drank from it without wiping the mouth, which is not something he would have done in the past.

'Report,' he said in that croaking voice.

Corporal Hesse brought him up to date on the situation. His burning glance moved from face to face. If he was embarrassed by what he had been told of his performance he gave no sign. He accepted all of the information with a brusque nod of his head. He got up and he walked around what was left of the pyre. He stirred the ashes with the toe of his boot and then he returned to where we sat.

'We need to report to Company HQ for reassignment,' he said.

'We need to find it first, sir,' said Hesse. I could tell he was as disturbed by this apparition as we all were.

'I don't think that should prove beyond our wit, corporal,' said the Understudy. 'Those adepts have access to the comm-net. We can use their machinery to contact Company.'

Hesse looked confused for a moment then he smiled and said, 'Yes, sir.'

All of us nodded. We were accustomed to following orders and it was reassuring to have someone who could tell us what to do again. 'I'll see to it at once, sir,' Hesse said.

‘We need to set sentries for this evening,’ he said. ‘This sloppiness stops now.’

He kept barking out commands until we responded like a well-drilled infantry company and only once everything was organised to his satisfaction did he settle down by what was left of our fire. He just sat there staring into the flames, unmoving as a puppet whose strings had been cut. He was still doing it as those of us not on watch drifted off to sleep.

He was in the same position when Anton woke me at dawn to relieve him on watch. I wondered what he was seeing in the ashes.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINE

The next morning one of the techs came over and spoke to the Understudy.

‘Some of our units are going to Central Command. If you wish you may accompany them in our vehicles.’

The Understudy nodded. ‘Get ready to move out,’ he said to us. He turned to the adept and said, ‘We’re ready to go whenever you are.’

‘Our units will be in ready state for departure in five minutes and thirty-one seconds,’ the adept said. ‘You may ride in vehicle number two. Be warned – tamper with nothing on pain of extinction.’

The Understudy looked at the tech. ‘You do not have the authority to execute me or my men.’

‘You misunderstand me – tampering with our equipment without the requisite ritual may cause extinction without intervention on the part of any.’

The Understudy nodded. It was as clear to him as it was to me what the tech meant. He looked at Corporal Hesse. ‘You heard that! Make sure every man in the unit knows the same.’

Hesse nodded and turned to me and said, ‘You heard the second lieutenant. Make sure everyone knows not to touch any of the stuff. Explain to them that if the techs or the gear do not kill any would-be tinkerer then I will. And I particularly mean you, Anton!’

‘When have you ever known me not to do something stupid, corporal?’ Anton said with one of his most maddening grins.

‘When you are asleep,’ Hesse replied. ‘And even then I don’t doubt your dreams are full of idiocy.’

We loaded as much gear as we could carry into our backpacks. Mostly it was ammunition and food with one or two keepsakes from our fallen comrades. I stood at the back of the Atlas, unwilling to get into the recovery vehicle as the others filed past me. I glanced back at our old Baneblade, now covered in strange white technical symbols, determined to get a last look at it.

I did not move until Corporal Hesse pulled me in and then slammed the heavy metal door shut behind me. The last I saw of the ancient war machine was its gigantic shattered hull that reminded me of bones peeking through the flesh of a corpse. I can still see it now, if I close my eyes and let the memories come.

It was distinctly cold in the interior of the Atlas. We found places wherever we could. The techs had not done anything to make us more comfortable. Heavy metal packing boxes were stacked everywhere. Salvaged parts were thrown among them and we found spaces wherever we could to sit down or lie down. It was quite dark and no one had thought to put the lights on. I suppose the techs relied on their night vision goggles. Anton banged on the bulkhead and someone upfront must have understood what he meant for a glowglobe flickered on and illuminated the scene dimly.

The Understudy sat on top of one of the packing cases and stared off into the distance even though there was nothing to see. He seemed lost in thought. It was almost as if he was a machine himself and had just shut himself down while he waited. The rest of us studied the packing cases curiously. All others were wondering what was in them and I know that Anton and Hesse in particular must have been feeling a bad case of itchy fingers. However, the warnings of the techs took effect and nobody made any move to try and open one of them.

I felt confined inside the Atlas in a way that I never had in the much more restricted interior of the Baneblade’s command cabin. I stood there, swaying with every lurch of the recovery vehicle, holding on to some pipework on the wall and wondering why that should be. Perhaps it was because there was nothing for me to do except stand there and because I had no control over anything that happened. I will say one thing for being the driver of a Baneblade – it gives you a tremendous sense of power

having those mighty engines respond to your command.

I began to feel claustrophobic. I envied the Understudy his ability to ignore his surroundings. Sometimes, over the roar of the engines, I thought I could hear the distant sound of heavy artillery. Of course, that just made me worry about being hit by some stray shell or lascannon shot. Every time the Atlas hit an obstruction or lurched around because of uneven ground, my stomach clenched. I began to sweat. My mouth felt dry. I was more scared than I had been in the battle around the Baneblade.

I told myself I was being foolish but it did not help. Perhaps it was some sort of delayed reaction to the events of the day before. Perhaps it was simply that death was on my mind, but I began to think that I was going to die inside that small, cramped chamber, that I would never see the light of day again, that the inside of the Atlas would be my coffin.

I noticed that Anton and Ivan were looking at me strangely.

'What are you looking at?' I asked.

'I don't know but it's looking back,' Anton said. It was an old challenge from our childhoods. He smiled as he said it.

'You're looking a bit green around the gills,' Ivan said. 'Got something on your mind?'

He said it quietly so that neither the corporal nor the Understudy could hear him.

'No,' I replied. 'I'm just thinking.'

'I'm not surprised that you look sick then,' Anton said. 'You don't want to put too much strain on that tiny brain of yours.'

'At least he has a brain,' Ivan said. 'When I look in your ear I can see clean out the other side.'

We kept bickering and chatting quietly as the Atlas moved on across the ruins of the city towards the distant sound of battle.

Eventually, the Atlas came to a halt. The back doors were thrown open and a red-cowled adept stood there. 'You must exit here,' he said. 'This is as far as we can take you.'

We were all grateful to pile out. I looked around and saw that in the direction we had come there was nothing but rubble for leagues and leagues. Around us now though were some more starscrapers. I heard the thunder of heavy weapons fire very close and the roar of vehicle engines and the monstrous tread of Titans as they walked.

The Understudy was the last out of the Atlas and he consulted his wrist chronometer. Like all officers' watches in the Seventh it had a navigator built into it. Having checked the coordinates of our present position he turned and walked towards where he knew headquarters must be. He did not say thank you or goodbye to the techs but they did not seem to notice. I waved to them as we departed and none of them waved back or said farewell.

We marched through streets blocked with the rubble. When you are on the side of a hive, you lose all awareness of the fact. It is like being on the side of a volcano. We had a view of endless starscrapers retreating into the distance, each higher than the next, like a range of mountains that might cover half the world. The towers we had seen as we approached the city were little more than tiny replicas of these enormous structures. It seemed foolish of us to have attacked this place. We were like an army of ants trying to invade a human city. The vast height of the hive was lost in clouds. In the distance was a peculiar glow, illuminating the sky, a blurred patch of light at once ominous and mystical. I wondered what it was. I had seen it before but I was no nearer to understanding.

As we got closer to the sound of battle, we were suddenly enclosed by a tide of men and armoured vehicles storming towards a distant goal. It was strange because we were the only part of that mass that did not have orders. Soldiers moved all around us, running into place, taking up position, at first hundreds and hundreds of them and then thousands and thousands.

It did not seem like we even had a goal but I had underestimated the Understudy's newfound determination and resourcefulness. We kept going until we entered the rubble-strewn ruins of a city square. There were tents here and signs pointing towards cellars and, when he asked, the Understudy was given directions to our new HQ.

Much to my surprise we were hustled through the place and into the august presence of the colonel. I don't think I had been so close to old Walrus-face as I was then. I could have reached out and plucked a bristle from the great moustache that drooped down long past his narrow chin. I could have reached out and pulled one of the scores of medals and ribbons from the chest plate of his enormously elaborate uniform.

The inside of the bunker was full of the officers of his entourage, studying

maps, listening to the comm-net but mostly trying to toady to our regimental commander while they had the chance. Lho stick fug filled the air. The subdued hum of reports coming in and being responded to was audible all around.

‘Ryker, good to see you,’ he said, using the Understudy’s real name. ‘Thought we had lost you when the *Indomitable* brewed up.’

The old Understudy would have fawned at his notice, would probably have offered to lick his boots clean. The new Understudy just stared at him as if trying to decipher meaning from the words of a xenos.

If the colonel was discomfited by this, he gave no sign. I suppose he had enough lackeys grovelling around him. Or maybe he had more experience of talking to young officers just emerged from the hell of battle than I give him credit for.

‘Well, it’s a jolly good show that you survived. Lord High Commander Macharius himself was asking after you and Lieutenant Doblinsky and your crew. You are all to be decorated by him personally for being first through the gate.’

‘Lieutenant Doblinsky is dead, sir,’ said the Understudy in his rasping monotone.

‘Then we’ll be needing someone to take his place, won’t we, Lieutenant Ryker?’ He beamed as he field-promoted the Understudy on the spot. ‘Of course, we will have to put in the appropriate paperwork but don’t worry, it will be confirmed within a decade or so.’

Everyone laughed at his little joke except the Understudy. I think he had passed into a world without humour as well as without sanity. ‘Thank you, sir,’ was all he said. ‘Will we be reassigned to a Baneblade?’

The colonel slapped his side as if the Understudy had made a good joke. ‘Of course, as soon as the replacements are delivered. That should be right about the time the paperwork for your brevet comes back from Headquarters.’

‘I see, sir,’ said the Understudy, obviously baffled.

‘Anyway, we’ll need to keep you and your boys close at hand until you can all be presented to Lord High Commander Macharius. It would not do to lose any more of you, would it, Lieutenant Ryker?’

I could see the strangeness of the Understudy was starting to get through even to the colonel. He was obviously not used to such a cold reaction to

his bluff good humour. The officers of the colonel's entourage were beginning to stare at the Understudy a little disapprovingly. I had the feeling it would become a whole avalanche of disapproval if the colonel gave the sign. If the Understudy was aware of any of this, his mask-like features gave not the slightest sign.

'No Baneblade, sir?' was all he said.

'Keen to get back in the saddle, eh?' said the colonel. 'Can't say as I blame you! Want to take another swipe at the damned heretic, eh?'

The colonel was obviously keen to put the best possible interpretation on the Understudy's behaviour. The expressions of the faces of the entourage warmed as they realised this. Suddenly they all admired the Understudy's martial spirit.

'Yes, sir,' was all the Understudy said. I was glad for his sake that he at least had the sense to say that.

'Don't worry, you'll be spilling heretic blood soon enough. For the moment, I want you and these keen lads close by. You can guard Central until the Lord High Commander gets here.'

'He is coming here, sir?' For all the interest in the Understudy's voice, we might have been discussing the possibility of canned synthi-protein for dinner again.

'He's in the city, reviewing the troops. I am sure as soon as he hears that the crew of the *Indomitable* survived he will want to meet them personally. He was impressed by the way you took the Gate.'

I had the sense that this had better prove to be the case or we might all find ourselves in trouble. At the moment, it looked like we were the colonel's pets. That could all so easily change.

A glance at the faces of the rest of the crew showed me they were excited. We would meet Macharius personally. We would be decorated. There would be bonuses and privileges and all manner of seven-day wonders. All we had to do was live long enough to see the day.

How difficult could that be, I asked myself? After all, we were being set to guard Central HQ.

We left the colonel's bunker and were assigned quarters in the basement of a nearby starscraper. It seemed that the colonel was serious about keeping us alive to meet Macharius because we were not given any duties at the

time. In fact, we were given a pass that enabled us to wander around headquarters as we wished until summoned. I had never seen such a thing before but I was profoundly grateful for it because I had a lot on my mind.

The rest of the survivors of the *Indomitable* dumped their gear in the room and went out to explore but I lay in the chambers – a small cell really, but it had beds and some blankets and it felt like luxury after many nights sleeping inside a Baneblade or on the ground – and stared at the ceiling and thought about all the people I had known over the past ten years. An alarming number of them had died, which was only to be expected I suppose since I was a soldier of the Imperial Guard. I was in no mood to do anything but think and sleep and since the latter was preferable to the former, I soon closed my eyes and drifted off into strange and claustrophobic dreams.

I was woken by what felt like an earthquake and I thought the building was being shelled and that there was a chance that I would be buried alive. It turned out it was only Anton. He was sweating and there was a wild keenness in his eyes and he kept shaking me and saying, ‘Come and see this, Leo! Come and see this!’

‘You will be seeing my fist in your face,’ I said, ‘if you don’t stop shaking me.’

‘I’m serious! Come and see this! You’ve got to see it while it’s still visible!’ Something of his mad enthusiasm communicated itself to me and I rose from the bed and pulled on my boots and picked up my shotgun. ‘If this is not worth it,’ I said, ‘you’d better start running really quickly.’

I pumped the shotgun to make my point.

‘Oh – it’s worth it! You’ll believe it when you see it.’ He led me to an elevator tube. Ivan and the New Boy were waiting in it and both of them were grinning too.

‘When did you all get so friendly?’ I said.

‘Pay no attention to Leo,’ Anton instructed the New Boy. ‘He always gets depressed as soon as the battle is over.’

I might as well have been talking to myself. They just ignored me. The elevator took us all the way to the roof. I complained all the way up, and six hundred floors is a long way.

I emerged from the elevator and saw at once what had them so excited. A strong wind had blown in from the north-west. It had cleared the sky above

the hive city and from the enormous height of the skyscraper I had a clear view all the way to the horizon. Ahead of me lay the sides of the hive, endless lava-strewn slopes rising gigantically into the distance. Here and there more giant towers protruded from the sides. Enormous fortified roads snaked across the surface. Huge gates disappeared into the interior of the hive. It was an awesome sight, like looking at the sides of a man-made mountain. It was not that that had got their attention though. Tremendous as it was, the city seemed irrelevant compared to the sight of the Angel of Fire.

It drew your eye as if by magic. You could not help but stare at it. It looked like an enormously tall androgyne, possibly five hundred times the size of a normal man. It stood atop the spire of a gigantic building. It was armoured and it held a glowing sword in its hands but that was not what held your attention either. Spreading out from its shoulders were two enormous fiery wings, each bigger than the statue itself. This was the source of the glow that had been visible on the horizon for so long.

It was monstrous and awe-inspiring and it made you feel completely and utterly insignificant. I later learned that those wings of fire were created by venting industrial gas through the metal core of the statue. There was something about the atmospheric conditions or possibly the way the gas was emitted that made the flames spread in that way. I did not know that then and I did not care. I was astonished by the mere sight of the thing. Suddenly it became clear to me why the locals all thought that the Angel of Fire stood at the right hand of the Emperor. You would have too if you spent all of your life under the burning gaze of that enormous metal angel.

‘Was it worth it?’ Anton asked. I forgot even to pump the shotgun. I simply nodded and did not say anything. Ivan was studying the Angel through his magnoculars. The expression on his ruined face was impossible to read but you could see from the rapt tension of his stance that he was entranced, and could not tear his gaze away. There was a compulsion about the statue and I began to suspect that more than engineering and architecture was involved in this.

We had returned to the foot of the tower when sirens started to blow all around us. The racket was deafening. The horns blew three blasts and then stopped. We all looked at each other not quite understanding what was going on. We heard the sound of cheering all around us so I figured it could not be all bad. Maybe Macharius had arrived and was being greeted with

suitable enthusiasm by the troops.

As we entered our chambers I saw the Understudy had returned. ‘What is going on, sir?’ I asked.

He looked at me with those strange eyes of his and said, ‘The heretics have surrendered. General Sejanus just announced it over the comm-net.’

We all looked at each other incredulously. ‘It looks like this war is over,’ said the New Boy with the overconfidence of the young.

‘We’ll see about that,’ I muttered but no one seemed to share my misgivings. They were all too busy laughing and slapping each other on the back. All except the Understudy, that is. He glanced around with empty eyes, as if he did not quite understand what was going on.

OceanofPDF.com

Corroborative Evidence Cross-Reference 42K9-Cross-Reference J6. Under seal.

Extract from Record of Deaths Battle Group Sejanus Karsk IV Campaign 05.07.40012
Quota Record Form 6a
Approved: Varisov L, Colonel 7th Belial
Compiled: Parzival K, Captain 7th Belial
Forwarded to Battlegroup HQ, Karsk V Orbital

Section 124: Record of Deaths in Combat
Site: Irongrad.

Doblinsky M, Lt Commanding Imperial Baneblade *Indomitable.*
Cause of Death: Enemy Action.
Notes: Recommended for Order of Merit, Gates of Irongrad, Approved.

Bazilkov, O, Private, Engineer, Imperial Baneblade *Indomitable.*
Cause of Death: Enemy Action.
Notes: Recommended for Order of Merit, Gates of Irongrad, Approved Pending Investigation.

Korzakov, P, Private, Engineer, Imperial Baneblade *Indomitable.*
Cause of Death: Enemy Action.
Notes: Recommended for Order of Merit, Gates of Irongrad, Approved.

Krakov, V, Private, Engineer, Imperial Baneblade *Indomitable*.

Cause of Death: Enemy Action.
Notes: Recommended for Order of Merit, Gates of Irongrad, Pending.

Manzurian, K, Private, Gunner, Imperial Baneblade *Indomitable*.
Cause of Death: Enemy Action.
Notes: Recommended for Order of Merit, Gates of Irongrad, Pending.

Manzurian L, Private, Gunner, Imperial Baneblade *Indomitable*.
Cause of Death: Unknown. MIA.
Notes: Recommended for Order of Merit, Gates of Irongrad, Pending.

Zenikov, I, Private, Gunner, Imperial Baneblade *Indomitable*.
Cause of Death: Enemy Action.
Notes: Recommended for Order of Merit, Gates of Irongrad, Denied.

OceanofPDF.com

Document under seal. Extract From the Decrypted Personal Files of Inquisitor Hyronimus Drake.
Possible evidence of duplicity on the part of former High Inquisitor Drake.
Cross-reference to Exhibit 107D-21H (Report to High Inquisitor Toll).

Walk in the Emperor's Light.

I have personally put several of the heretic commanders to the question. Under extreme duress and in the presence of sanctioned psykers they have revealed much. As always with heretics, it is difficult to sift through their deluded rantings and extract the core of truth, if any truth there ever be. The heretics of Karsk System have fallen into many of the Ten Great Errors. They believe themselves to be the sole possessors of cosmic truth and the true bearers of the Emperor's Word. They believe us to be deluded invaders even in the face of their demonstrable error. They are prepared to die in the service of the false beliefs they hold.

Most of their commanders seem sincerely to believe, as is always the case, and refused to recant even under instructive surgery. The capacity to hold to such faith is admirable and I believe will prove most worthy once this world is re-educated into the Faith.

We have so far failed to take one of the so-called Sons of the Sacred Flame alive. When on the verge of capture they spontaneously combust, often taking those sent to bring them to the question with them into death. They have demonstrated psychic powers of alarming strength. I am reminded of many other heretics I have encountered who were proven to have drawn

their power from daemonic sources. So far there is no proof that the Sons of the Sacred Flame draw energy from the Enemies of Mankind but I fear it will only be a matter of time before this is shown to be the case.

In the meantime, I have placed a request at the highest level that sufficient resources be allocated to the capture of a ranking member of this cult so that we may get to the truth of the matter. I am also ensuring that agents of the highest degree of competence and discretion are being infiltrated into position in the locality.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TEN

En masse we marched in triumph through a great arched gateway, flanked by two fire-winged angels fifty times as tall as a man, and passed into the depths of Hive Irongrad. Behind me stretched out long lines of grey-uniformed soldiers. Up ahead massive tanks roared like victorious beasts. In our hundreds of thousands we strode beneath banners that showed our regiment, our unit and our triumphs on a thousand different worlds. The High Command wanted no one to be in any doubt that the legions of the Emperor had returned to reclaim this world in His name.

I felt odd, marching along behind the tanks instead of driving the *Indomitable*. It had been a long time since I walked in parade file down the ramp-streets of a hive. Ahead of me a long line of machines receded into the distance. Overhead the lights of the level roof glittered like low-hanging stars.

Beside me were Hesse and Anton and Ivan and the others, their weapons slung over their shoulders, their boots polished and a swagger in their stride.

For the first time since we set foot on this benighted world I began to feel at home. The air had the recycled taste of a hive interior. It was different from that of Belial Masterforge but it had something of the same tang, of having been breathed a billion, billion times. There was the faint chemical undercurrent of the purification filters and the slightly rotten under-taste that I came to associate with Irongrad. It was warmer in this hive than it

was in Belial Masterforge and the people were not so over-dressed. If the life-support systems broke down their problem was not going to be freezing and clearly they all knew this.

The hive was different in many other ways. The hab-towers were massive columns which supported the roofs that were the floors of the levels above. All of them were covered in titanic copper pipes through which ran gas and hot water and sewage and effluent. The sides of each tower vented flames as if they were engaged in some vast industrial process that was also a sacred rite. Each of the vents was moulded to resemble the Angel of Fire. It looked like a legion of rebel angels were poised for fire-winged flight across the city.

Between the hab-towers were expansive plazas and in every plaza was a fountain of fire. Emerging from their flames was a metal replica of the great statue of the Angel of Fire. Near every fountain was one of those sinister cages. Some were massive enough to hold hundreds of chained victims, some so small they seemed designed to hold children or dwarfs. Time and again as we made our way down into the belly of the hive I saw those ornate cages we had first seen in the desert with their x-frames and those devilish face-masks. No matter how crowded the streets were, there was always a clear space around them. It did not take a lot of imagination to work out why. Some of them were held on winches over the streets while below them flames vented from the pipes in the building sides.

Massive crowds watched us as we progressed downwards. The streets were full of folk looking down at us from every window and balcony. The people did not cheer but they did not seem hostile either. They were not sullen. They were curious. We were their world’s new masters. I suspected we could not have been much worse than their previous ones if we had been cannibal orks. The population had been so beaten down, so accustomed to the lash that they expected it from us and they did not even resent it.

The Irongradders seemed like typical hive dwellers: pasty-faced, undernourished, weary-looking from long, long hours of work. They could have been dropped here right from my old home-world. It made me feel oddly nostalgic and I could tell the others felt the same way.

Overhead glow-globes hovered. We passed flickering signs that exhorted us to worship the Angel and believe in his might. Our tech-priests had not got round to their ritual re-invocation yet. I found the images of the flame-

winged angel and his burning-headed priesthood disturbing to say the least. I thought of the strange powers they had displayed and it seemed unlikely to me that there was anything holy about them. The Angel inspired awe and fear in me in about equal parts. The priests simply inspired fear and a desire to do murder if I got the chance. There must be many of them still out there and I very much doubted that they would give up the fight, whatever the planetary governor and the nobles of his court said.

Eventually, the long march ended, deep within the hive. We were confronted with our new home, billeted in factorum hab-units requisitioned by our Commissariat. The rooms within the massive buildings were huge and high-ceilinged and did not seem full even with a company of soldiers camped out in them. There were sinister fire-winged angels everywhere, astride the cornice of every building, worked in the frescoes of every ceiling. It was the sort of artwork, mass-produced and replicated in industrial scale, that only hive worlds can manage. In every alcove, on every desk, glaring down from every wall there were representations of the focus of the local religion. Someone had even used a small metal statue to prop open the door to the chamber in which we were to sleep.

'Could be worse,' Anton said as we entered and surveyed the huge hall with its hundreds of beds each with a locker beside it. I knew what he was thinking. It reminded him of the guild dormitories back on Belial. Hundreds of men swarmed around the place, lying on beds, stowing their gear, making a claim to some space. I recognised none of them. They were all like us, survivors of broken units, waiting to be reassigned or reformed into new companies. They might even be our new company for all I knew.

How many times had I done this, I wondered?

How many times had I dumped my gear in a new room or new tent or new barracks' locker, looked around at Ivan and Anton and told them that if they touched my gear they were dead? How many times had I watched Anton grin his idiot grin and Ivan make that chirruping whistle that shows he thinks I am talking nonsense again? Too many times to count or remember, I suspect.

It's part of a soldier's life – to make camp constantly and move on again, to leave rooms and buildings and cities and worlds in their wake. To leave behind buried friends and lost loves as well. To be a soldier in the 41st millennium is to be a small atom of life, constantly in motion, never truly at

rest anywhere until they burn your body or put you in the ground.

‘They say the locals call this place the City of the Angel,’ Anton said. He had tossed his pack on the floor and was busy scouring through it for his prop-nov. The rest of his gear joined a growing untidy pile on the floor. Tunic lay on shirt. His hip flask clinked when he tossed it beside his boots and badges.

‘I wonder why that is?’ I said sourly.

Ivan whistled a few descending notes. ‘Could that be because there is a huge bloody iron angel looming over the whole place and a statue of it on every street corner?’ He had stowed his gear under his bed and just sat there, taking a slug from his hip-flask. I wondered how much there was left in it. Not much at the rate he went through it and we would not be getting any more cooling fluid that would convert to rot-gut alcohol any time soon.

Anton held up a map and unfolded it, as if he might find his prop-nov within. I recognised it, soiled as it was. It was an old Imperial Survey map of Zone Three on Jurasik Prime. We had left a trail of dead heretics strewn across that place. Some of the stains on the map came from their blood. A sudden vivid image of green jungles and tropical islands came back to me. I remembered a pillbox built into cliffs and the *Indomitable* racing through waves all guns blazing.

‘I didn’t lend you my book, did I, Leo?’ Anton asked.

‘Why the hell would I want your bloody prop-nov?’ I said. ‘I’ve read it almost as many times as you.’

That strictly speaking was not true. Anton must have read that piece of Imperial propaganda a thousand times or more, almost as many times as he had read *The Imperial Infantryman’s Uplifting Primer*. He had been reading it at least once a week since we had started work in the factorum in Belial when we were twelve. I always remember him, hunched over it, tracing the line with his finger, his lips moving as he spelled out the words even though anyone else would have known them by heart.

‘Ivan?’ he asked.

‘You know I hate the bloody thing!’

‘All the more reason for you to take it and destroy it,’ said Anton.

‘Now you are putting ideas in my head.’

‘Don’t even think about it.’

‘You try the external pocket in your pack?’ I asked.

‘Of course I did. You think I am an idiot or something?’

‘You already know the answer to that.’ I reached down and lifted the pack up out of the growing pile of unwashed clothing and the gee-gaws Anton had acquired over the years of campaigning. I flicked open the seal on the right tab pocket where Anton always kept the book, reached in and pulled it out.

‘You just put it there,’ he said petulantly.

‘Yeah – I used my psyker powers to do that. Maybe I’ll use them to combust the book now.’

‘Don’t you dare!’ He stuck out a long bony hand. Behind him Ivan nodded his head. I tossed the book over Anton’s head to him.

‘Give me that, you bastard,’ Anton shouted, turning to try and grab it out of Ivan’s hand. Ivan tossed it to the New Boy.

‘You’ll hand that over right now, if you know what’s good for you, New Boy,’ Anton said. The New Boy looked abashed and hung his head down. He humbly held the book out and then when Anton reached for it, he tossed it to me.

Anton howled and dived at me. I just had time to toss the book away before he grappled me, his hand going for my throat. I noticed the others had gone oddly quiet and when I looked over Anton’s shoulder I could see why. The Understudy was standing there. He had caught the book as he entered the chamber without knocking.

Anton turned to see what I was looking at and his face went white. We saluted, ludicrous as that must have looked from our current position.

The Understudy said, ‘You are to report to the parade ground at nine hundred Imperial. You will be presented to Lord High Commander Macharius for decoration.’

He turned the book over in his hand as if inspecting some xenos relic then he put it down on the bed and said, ‘Carry on.’

Then he left. After that, no one was in the mood for brawling.

I stood before the assembled regiments in the great square outside our new barracks. They were illuminated by the dancing flames of the central fire fountain, drawn up in massed ranks before their vehicles, dressed in their best uniforms, all scrubbed and polished for the occasion. All it would have taken was one well-placed artillery shell and a whole regiment could have

been wiped out, leaving their tanks for the enemy to take.

Our own regiment stood to the fore. The Seventh Belial had been first into Irongrad and had held the factorum zone in the teeth of a massive rebel counter-attack. We had been the spearhead of the crusade and had been tested and not broken. Of course, there were a damn sight fewer of us than there used to be but what did that matter to Command. We could always be replaced. There is no resource more common in the universe than the flesh of human soldiers.

All of us were waiting for Macharius. It seemed like the whole galaxy was back then. There was an air of anticipation about the ceremony that I had never experienced before. I stood to the left of the podium raised between the chassis of two Baneblades and I sensed it. It was as if every soldier awaited the arrival of a prophet, of someone who would transform their lives with his words. Only the Understudy did not seem touched by the atmosphere. Not even the revivalist feel of that great crowd could get through to the surface of whatever desolate world it was in which he walked.

A huge roar announced Macharius's arrival. The gleaming oval of an aircar appeared in the sky overhead. It was the governor's own vehicle, not military but a gorgeous gold and gem-encrusted aerial carbuncle. Under other circumstances, it would have seemed impossibly gaudy compared to the grim durasteel tanks lined up below it, but the idea that Macharius was within it transformed all that. The aircar seemed entirely appropriate for a conqueror of worlds. Just the sight of it brought cheers from the assembled troops.

The golden vehicle descended until it hovered over the platform. A door in its side opened and a long stairway extruded itself. Moments later Macharius strode regally down it, surrounded by his entourage. From my place beside the platform I got a clear view of him in profile. As ever, he looked like a mortal god. There was a radiance about him that had nothing to do with the personal body-shield he was wearing. He simply eclipsed all of those around him, even formidable men like Inquisitor Drake and squat, muscular General Sejanus. Tech-priests followed his every move with their monitoring devices. Technical cherubim hovered observantly over them. As ever the occasion was to be recorded and broadcast to the armies.

Macharius spread his arms wide in majestic greeting and then his imperial

progress took him out of my sight. He spoke to the crowd briefly, his voice amplified by ancient technological artifice, his words relayed to our forces across the face of the planet and all the worlds of the system by the arcane science of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

I have seen the recordings of it since, the way he took the acclamation of the army as nothing more than his due and yet managed to make you feel as if it was deserved and not mere arrogance. There was something about Macharius then that made you think you were in the presence of something more than mortal. He had that quality that Space Marines have, of making you feel insignificant, but unlike them, there was no apartness. He was human, and he regarded you as human and being in his presence raised you up to the same exalted plane on which he lived.

Eventually the time came for us to be ushered into that imperial presence. He smiled as he saw us. You can see it in the recordings. He looks sincerely pleased and maybe he was. You can see all the surviving crew of the *Indomitable* as he pins the First-In medals on our chests. We all look much smaller than him and faintly embarrassed by the attention. All of us except the Understudy – he looks inhumanly distant.

Macharius praised us and pinned the decorations on our tunics. I remember standing close to him as he did so and thinking how tall he was and how young he looked. He radiated power and good health and a certain reserved good fellowship. When he looked at you, you felt the full power of his attention fall on you. When he spoke, he seemed genuinely interested in what you had to say, even if you only stuttered out your words as Anton did. He placed his hand on your shoulder in a comradely fashion and then moved on.

What I remember most about him is his sense of presence. Macharius was truly there. It was as if he was a solid thing and everything else around him was a shadow. Damn, I could spend the rest of my life trying to find the words to describe that but in the end all descriptions would be irrelevant. They could never give you the sense of the sheer primordial power of the man.

I know he talked to me and to this day I cannot remember what he said or what I said in return except in the vaguest of ways. I know he praised my bravery and I thanked him for it, and that he meant it and I meant it, which given how cynical I am, is a tribute to the man’s charisma.

At the end of the ceremony we were cheered by the assembled troops while Macharius watched and applauded himself. He got back into the governor’s air-chariot and flew away and I watched him go thinking that was the last time I would ever speak to him.

Of course, I was wrong.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I crouched behind the wreck of an autocar while a bunch of maniacal gangers took pot-shots at us with their home-made pistols. A slug ricocheted off the hood of the vehicle and bounced through a shop window, shattering the glass.

‘Just like the old neighbourhood on a feast-day night,’ Anton said, rising and snapping off a shot with his lasgun. Somebody screamed. Anton dropped back into place and grinned.

‘Makes me nostalgic,’ Ivan said and whistled through his iron teeth. I could tell he was thinking of taking a few shots himself or maybe even charging. He had always been fond of a brawl in the old days.

I stuck my head up and gazed around the street. There were still plenty of armed youngsters there, high on blaze and full of fight. They lurked behind overturned autocars and inside burned-out ground transporters. The battle to take Irongrad might have been over but it’s always a war inside a hive. In this neighbourhood it had probably been war since the hab-blocks went up.

Many of the local gangers had taken the overthrow of the Sons of the Flame as a signal to indulge in an orgy of looting and rape and general score-settling. The Fire worshippers must have been feared indeed to have kept so tight a lid on the seething cauldron of violence that was Irongrad. We had been sent out into the street with the rest of our new company to restore some order.

Overhead iron angels looked down from the high spots that their wings of

fire had carried them to. Ordinary citizens had dived for cover in doorways, behind trash cans, in the sumps that led down to the sewers. A ganger shouted abuse in his incomprehensible dialect and took another shot.

Once we had been decorated and the colonel had had his chance to strut in front of Macharius we were returned to duty. Our medals had not brought us any special privileges. We were assigned to a new scrub company made up of a motley assortment of soldiers – crews who had lost their vehicles, squads who were the only survivors of their companies, officers who had been wounded when the last big push came and had missed the chance to die in glorious battle when the heretics overran us. I could see some of the others huddled down in a doorway, getting ready to move up the street. One of them signalled that he wanted covering fire. I raised my hand in acknowledgement and got ready to give it to him.

'What in the name of the Emperor...' Anton said.

I followed his gaze and saw what had him so upset. The Understudy was walking up the street. He had his pistol held in his hand but it was by his side and he was not aiming at anything. Bullets ricocheted all around him, kicking up small clouds of dust in the street. He walked through them as if they were raindrops dropping from the sky on Jurasik. It was as if he did not believe he could be hit and somehow his faith created a force field around him that prevented that from happening. His face was pale. His eyes were focused on the distance. A bullet knocked off his cap and he bent down to pick it up and adjusted it on his head as if the wind had blown it off. I swear another bullet passed through the air where his face had just been.

It did provoke some action though. He stood up, pointed his pistol and snapped off a shot. I heard a scream from the direction he was firing in. He just kept walking forwards, firing as he went, and was occasionally rewarded with another scream. I looked at Ivan. Ivan looked at me. We were equally bemused. Anton grinned and said, 'What the hell!' He stood up and fired his lasgun. The bolt passed over the Understudy's shoulder and struck another ganger. Ivan and I sprang to our feet and raced forwards. The rest of the squad did the same. It seemed like the Understudy was getting all the attention anyway. They sent a hail of las-bolts pounding into the gangers and mowed a few down. Some of the others broke away and ran.

I had the shotgun in my hand but I couldn't use it because the Understudy

was in front of me. That did not stop Ivan from shooting. I think he was doing it more to keep the gangers pinned down than because he expected to hit anything. All three of us, the Understudy, Ivan and me, reached the gangers at the same time. I pushed my combat shotgun forwards and pulled the trigger and the spray from the pellet cartridge took out another three of them. The Understudy shot one and Ivan simply pointed his lasgun and said, ‘Surrender!’

The gangers dropped their guns. I don’t know what they found more frightening: the look on the Understudy’s face or the look of Ivan’s metal jaws. To tell the truth, there was little to choose between the two in terms of their frightfulness.

The Understudy studied the gangers with no more animosity than if they had been squabbling children. I cannot say that Ivan and Anton and myself were particularly gentle with them. I’ve never really cared for people who shoot at me.

The gangers were hauled off for either execution or forced conscription and we returned to patrolling the streets and keeping our eyes open for devotees of the Angel of Fire.

It was another typical day on the streets of Irongrad. I remember it only because it was that night we met the girls.

We sat in the cellar of the Angel’s Blessing. I studied the room from my seat in the corner. It was small, it was dark and it was full of fug from lho sticks and glittersmoke. Small gas-lights guarded by crystal bowls threw flickering light out into the gloom. Behind the bar, a shaven-headed local dispensed rotgut alcohol from bottles that inevitably displayed on the label some scene from the career of the Angel of Fire or one of his many associated saints, and the name of the factorum that produced it.

I looked across the table at Anton and Ivan and the New Boy. They all had glasses in front of them. Ivan had an open bottle which he was reserving for his own exclusive use. The rest of us went the more conventional route and had a waitress bring us drinks.

‘Well this is cosy,’ said Anton. Locals were coming down the narrow stairs, taking in the clientele at a glance and mostly leaving. At least the men were. Some of the local girls stayed. It was the usual pattern. You see it on a thousand worlds.

There were plenty of men from our unit there. Some wore the local trinkets, little metal angel pins or chokers. Others had more sinister souvenirs, numbers made up of small skulls inked on arms and necks and foreheads with the name of Irongrad underneath them. The tattoos were an old regimental way of indicating how many people they had killed in that battle. Some of those were lies, some of them were boasts and some of them were understatements. I thought it was premature. I was not entirely certain that the battle for the city was really over. The gangs were still fighting in the streets. There was unrest in many of the hab-zones and no one really knew what had happened to the cultists who had caused so much trouble.

'Did you see the Understudy today?' the New Boy asked. 'He walked through the hail of fire as if he never even noticed it.'

'Maybe he didn't,' I said.

'I can't believe it's the same man I had to carry out of the cockpit of Number Ten.' How easily he called it Number Ten, I thought. It was almost as if he had spent ten years in the tank the same as me, and not the few days he had. I felt like telling him you had to earn the right to use the nickname but what was the point.

'He's gone daft,' said Anton.

'You know it's pretty bad when Anton calls you daft,' said Ivan.

'I am serious,' said Anton. 'Come on, we've all seen it. Sometimes men snap. Something in their brain breaks and it changes them. Remember Yuri after we pulled him out of the bunker on Jurasik? Kept gibbering that the green men were all around and coming to get him.'

'Well, we had been fighting orks,' I said. 'So he was probably right.'

'We had killed them all. He was seeing bloody invisible orks.'

'You can't see invisible things,' Ivan pointed out. 'That's what being invisible is all about.'

'You know what I mean. He was mad, gibbering mad.'

'The Understudy is not like that,' I said.

'I know but it's a similar thing. Sometimes men see something and their minds break.'

'You're safe then,' said Ivan. 'You don't have a mind.'

'Ha bloody ha!'

The New Boy shuddered and took a swig of his greenish-coloured drink. 'I

think there are things here that might do that to a man, if he stuck around long enough.'

He was starting to get round to it now, the thing that was really on his mind. 'What do you mean?' I asked, to give him a reason to go on talking.

'I mean what are all those cages about?'

'They are for putting people to death,' I said.

'Who the hell puts anyone to death that way?'

'Does it matter? People die whatever.'

'Yeah but...'

'We use firing squads,' I said. 'They use cages.'

'It's not the same,' the New Boy said.

He was right of course, but there was drink in my belly and I was feeling contrary. I usually do once I've had a few. 'Isn't it?'

'You know it's not, Leo,' said Ivan. 'One way is quick and clean, the other is slow and cruel.'

'And yeah, the Imperium is never slow or cruel,' I said.

'Not this way.'

'Ivan's right, Leo,' Anton said. 'There's something rotten about killing people that way, something strange. It's the work of those priests.'

'You may be right,' I said.

'You know I am. It has the stink of heresy to it.'

The debate might have taken a downright theological turn but we were interrupted.

Corporal Hesse came in. His uniform was clean. His boots were polished. His small moustache was well-trimmed. He had a girl under each arm. He did not look like much, did the corporal, but he was always a hit with the ladies. He looked kind and jolly and he was always generous to them so I suppose it was understandable. His presence dispelled the last of the gloom hanging over the table even though all he did was sweep past us, slap some of the local scrip on the table and say loudly, 'Have a farewell drink for old Number Ten on me.' Then he was gone. It was like a personal ritual he had to perform and we all have some of those.

'Thanks, corporal,' I said to his departing back. 'I don't mind if I do.'

Anton nudged me in the ribs with an elbow. I glanced up to see what he was looking at. A group of three pretty young women had entered.

'Just what I need to take my mind off your gloomy chatter,' he said. He

rose and went to introduce himself. He spoke for a while and returned to our table, leading a small blonde girl by the arm. ‘This is Katrina,’ he said.

He indicated a tall, dark girl. ‘This is Lutzka and this is Yanis.’ The third was a plump and pretty girl. ‘They are nurses at the Hospice of Saint…?’

‘Saint Oberon,’ said Katrina. ‘It’s the best hospice in the hive. All of the nobles go there for treatment.’ She seemed very proud of that.

‘I’m sure they do,’ said Anton smoothing his hair. ‘And I’m sure you give them the treatment they deserve.’

Ivan dragged over some chairs for them with a courtliness you would not have believed possible and they sat down. Katrina was next to Anton. Lutzka was next to Ivan and Yanis was next to the New Boy. I was stranded in my corner, next to none of the girls. Not that I cared enough to move anyway. I was in a foul and contrary mood.

They settled down to chat and smooch and I settled down to drink. Maybe I should have chatted to one of the girls. If I had my life would have been much different. I would probably not have fallen in with Anna for one thing. I had a few more drinks and then I staggered back to the barracks. We had a patrol in the morning. The others did not seem to mind. Their attention was all on the women.

It was crowded in the Chimera. I didn’t care. I was in the turret, watching the streets go by. On these, the deeper levels of the hive, it was always the same. The buildings towered over us, festooned with metal seraphim. A titanic angel glared down on us from gigantic murals set in the roof, details picked out by wandering spotlights on the hab-tops. Trash had piled up like snow drifts along the side of the buildings, where maintenance tubes had broken down and services were impaired. Rats the size of a man’s head watched us with glittering, malign eyes and chittered to each other in the language of their kind.

There had been an ambush. One of our patrols had been set upon by hordes of the heretics. They had called in for help. We had been sent in response.

Ivan held the controls of the heavy bolter and studied the streets. If he was hungover you couldn’t tell. He was looking for targets. All we could see were people garbed in the light robes so common among the workers here. We were getting closer to the ambush site though. You could tell from the

smell of burning flesh.

The fight had come to a climax in one of those plazas that centred around a burning cage. Our boys had made a good show of it. They had left hundreds of dead behind them as they went. Corpses still littered the ground despite the hordes of collectors who had gathered to strip the bodies and drag them away to the gigantic crematorium. Bounties were still paid for that. It was one of the local laws that Macharius had let stand.

A few of the dead might have been innocent bystanders. I doubted it. In my experience, factorum workers are rarely so heavily armed.

We were not the first on the spot. A company had already deployed in the square. I saw officers gesturing and shouting orders. I saw a ratling sniper perched on top of a winged angel statue and surveying the crowd of corpse collectors through the scope of his high-powered rifle.

The Chimera crunched bodies under its treads until a commissar gave the signal to halt. We stopped. The squad deployed. I clambered out of the turret and dropped into place beside Anton, my shotgun at the ready. Ivan stayed in the turret, hands still on the gun. I felt reassured to have him there. If trouble broke out, he knew how to handle such a weapon.

The commissar strode up to us. He was one of the icy-faced types. ‘Secure the perimeter, Lieutenant Ryker,’ he said. His voice was beautiful and mellow like that of an avuncular priest. It was surprising that such a man had such a voice.

‘Sir,’ said the Understudy. He began to rasp out the orders and we responded, moving to the edge of the plaza, taking cover behind burned-out cars, plascrete walls and podiums of statues. Anyone could see that it was too late, that the fighting was over, but no one was taking any chances. If an angry torch-bearing mob came back this way they would find themselves cut down in a hail of las-fire.

I found myself sheltering behind a plascrete bench with Corporal Hesse and the New Boy. Hesse did not look so jolly this morning. He was all business, just like the lasgun he held ready in his hand.

‘You see what they did back there?’ he asked, when he was sure that a horde of fanatics were not about to erupt from the side alleys and assault us at just this moment.

I had and I had been trying not to think about it. Around the fire fountain were half-burned bodies. More had been stuffed into a cage and set alight. I

did not doubt for a moment they had been our boys and they had been alive at the time. It could not have been a nice way to go.

‘I don’t think I want to be taken alive by these heretics,’ said the New Boy. He was not being flippant.

‘Best way to do that is shoot them with a lasgun,’ said Hesse. ‘See how they like being burned.’

‘I saw some of those priests back at the factorum,’ said the New Boy. ‘Las-fire did not even slow them down. It just made them stronger, like they fed on it.’

Hesse smiled grimly. ‘Then don’t shoot the priests, shoot the people with them. Leave the local holy men to Lemuel here. See if they like shotgun cartridges as much as they like las-bolts.’

I was not at all sure that I appreciated Hesse volunteering me for priest-killing duty but what he said made a certain amount of sense.

‘Alternatively you could always try a grenade,’ I said.

‘I don’t care if you piss on the bastards to put out their burning heads, you see one of those psykers, you put him down, however you have to.’ The corporal sounded angry, which was understandable given the circumstances. I was not in the best of moods myself. We stared at the plaza as if we expected a horde of fire-worshipping heretics to manifest at any moment. They kept stubbornly away.

We waited and waited but the heretics did not return to do any more burning. Clearly odds of less than a hundred to one did not suit them. Eventually the officers and the commissar and the people who seemed to be consulting with them decided they had seen enough. We were ordered back to the vehicles and headed back to base.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWELVE

The next day we stood on the walls and watched the army depart. Endless lines of massive battle-tanks roared off in advance of troop carriers. Valkyries swarmed in the air over them. Titans strode gigantically through the red murk of the dawn. The air vibrated with the passage of the army. Our words seemed to resonate inside our chests when we spoke.

‘We should be going with them,’ said Anton. ‘We should be in Number Ten.’

I wasn’t going to argue with him. If there was any justice in the galaxy we would have been out there in the *Indomitable*. The lieutenant would have been leading us and Oily and Henrik would have been with us. Instead we were with all the other troops of our hastily assembled company, standing guard on the walls of Irongrad, watching the army leave to go with Macharius to new conquests and victories. Somewhere in the distance were new hives, new heretic armies, new enemies. I told myself I should be glad that I was here, out of the way of danger, but I was not. I was disappointed.

‘It’ll be years before we get another Baneblade,’ said Ivan gloomily. ‘If ever we do.’

‘I’ve dreamed of being a tank driver,’ said the New Boy. ‘Now I am with the bloody footsloggers.’

‘Life’s not fair,’ I said. ‘You’ll get used to it.’

‘Like you have?’

‘Now you are just being disrespectful.’

‘They’ll get all the action,’ Anton said. His gaze followed the huge dust plumes kicked up by the army wistfully.

‘I am sure the locals will come up with something to keep us busy,’ I said. I was thinking about the increasing levels of violence on the streets and the rumours we had heard about the priesthood of the Angel of Fire becoming more active.

I shielded my eyes and kept staring out over the red-and-orange wastes. There were still some burned-out tanks out there from the days of our assault. The tech-adepts had not managed to salvage everything. It was pointless trying to count all the armoured vehicles down there but that did not stop me trying. I reached several dozen, a small fraction of the total, when Anton distracted me with one of his idiot questions. ‘Hey, Leo, what are the chances of us getting another Baneblade?’

‘About the same as you learning to think,’ I said.

‘I am serious,’ he said.

‘So am I,’ I said.

‘No, seriously, what do you think?’

‘I think we’ll all be dead of old age by the time we get reassigned. You know how the Munitorum works. If we’re lucky we won’t be reassigned to Valkyries.’

‘I quite fancy being a pilot,’ said Anton.

‘You have any training for it?’ I asked.

‘How difficult can it be?’

‘If it wasn’t too difficult for you, the Munitorum would never assign you to it,’ said Ivan.

‘Listen to the man, Anton,’ I said. ‘He understands military bureaucracy.’

‘I could learn,’ said Anton, never one to let the idiocy of a statement discourage him from making it. I watched Titans lope out now, the smaller Warhounds racing ahead as if to get to grips with the enemy all the sooner. The giant Reavers followed in their wake, cautious enough on the surface of a world that manufactured Shadowswords.

Despite myself I felt something like pride swell within me. It was an awesome force and it was only a small part of the army the Imperium was bringing to bear on this part of the universe. I felt like I was watching a metal tide that could cover an entire planet and crush all resistance and I was a small part of it. I looked at all the others and I think they felt the

same.

‘How far do you think they are going?’ the New Boy asked.

‘To the edge of the galaxy,’ I said.

The words had the ring of prophecy.

‘I am starting to hate this place,’ Anton said, conversationally. He held his lasrifle casually, in the crook of his arm, but I could tell he was ready to use it at the slightest provocation. His helmet was tilted back. His rebreather was slung round his neck. He rubbed his scar with his long fingers as he looked out into the crowds. The people watched us as we swept the streets on patrol. They did not look hostile. They did not look friendly. They just looked. We kept moving, bringing up the rear of the foot patrol. We were just there to be seen.

‘Why is that?’ I asked. I was not really interested but sometimes Anton’s inane chatter could provide distraction. I already thought I knew what he was going to say.

In the interval since the bulk of the army departed, things became ominously quiet in Irongrad. There was something odd going on beneath the surface though. Whenever I scanned the faces of that huge crowd I felt as if they were waiting for something, a sign perhaps, from us or from the Angel who had ruled their world for so long. I could not help but feel that concealed within those oceans of flesh were people who meant us ill.

Everywhere we went the gaze of the Angel looked down on us. Perched on the side of every hab-tower those metal-bodied seraphim stood ready to take flight on wings of fire. On every ceiling, murals showed its androgynous form. Every day we walked the streets of the hab-zones, just to show the fact that we were there, to remind the natives that a new order had come. Our grey uniforms looked drab and alien among the bright, ruddy colours favoured by the locals. In every square the fountains of fire still burned. Our tech teams had started to take away the sacrificial cages. Many a day I stood watch over them as the great machines demolished them and reclaimed the metal. I studied the faces in the crowd around me. I looked down the vast avenue of hab-blocks stretching to the horizon wall of the hive. Anton surprised me.

‘It looks like home in some ways, but it’s not.’

‘It does not look like Belial,’ I said. ‘It looks nothing like Belial.’

‘It’s a hive,’ he said.

‘And that’s it,’ I said. I looked around and saw no similarity. Belial was grim and grey and all around had been the signs of the heaviest of heavy industry. Pollutant smog had filled the streets and snaked below the level bridges like rivers of mist. The air temperature had been lower and the humidity far greater.

Everything had carried the signs of the different guilds and factories. Here, there was an awful uniformity about everything. The Cult of the Angel of Fire had strangled everything else, like a weed choking the life out of normal plants in an overgrown garden. Everything bore its stamp. All of the people bore its symbol. Metal angels hung from chains around every neck. There were more of those bloody angels than there were of any other Imperial ikons, including our own.

‘I hate those cages,’ Anton said. ‘Whoever thought of putting people to death that way was a madman.’

‘If you are being put to death, what does it matter how you die?’ I asked.

‘If you were going to greet the Emperor which would you prefer – a bolter shell through the head, quick and clean, or being burned alive inside a brewed-up Leman Russ?’

‘Neither,’ I said. ‘I plan on living till I am eighty and collecting a pension.’

‘And I planned on becoming a Space Marine,’ Anton said. ‘Let’s see how those things work out for both of us…’

‘Hush, the pair of you,’ said Ivan. ‘Something’s up.’

We had just entered a large square. All around were stalls where vendors sold hot food and cold metal religious trash, amulets and ikons of the Angel. A small group of people stared at us resentfully. They had been handing out pamphlets whose covers, inevitably, featured pictures of the Angel of Fire standing over the corpses of grey-uniformed off-world invaders.

Most people watched us blandly but some of the pamphleteers looked at us with a ferocious hate. Once a few of them picked up stones and bits of trash and pelted us with them. The Understudy stood there and watched and then strode forwards. A sense of menace, of strangeness, of quietness radiated out from him. I saw some of the stone-chuckers pause in mid-throw.

‘Put those down and go home,’ the Understudy said. His odd rasping voice carried even over the hubbub of the hive. ‘Go home and you will live.’

Somebody pulled back his arm to throw. Suddenly there was a pistol in the Understudy's hand. He pulled the trigger. The shot went right through the hand. The heretic screamed and fell. He writhed on the ground in agony.

'Anybody else?' the Understudy asked. They just looked at him. 'All right then, go.'

The locals looked shame-faced and shuffled their feet but he just stood there, quiet, gun in hand, a single figure confronting scores of them, unafraid. I watched to see what would happen next. I had the shotgun in my hand in case things turned nasty.

Much to my surprise, the crowd backed away. The Understudy gestured for a couple of the lads to come forwards and take the wounded man away for interrogation then walked back to the ranks and watched as the demolition team continued its work.

'Understudy we used to call him,' Anton said. 'More like a bloody Undertaker these days.'

'You keep calling him that and the name will stick,' I said.

'We'll see about that.'

The Understudy had his hand to his ear, listening to something on the comm-net in the ear bead. He looked around and gestured for us to follow him. It seemed like something was up. We piled into the Chimera and roared through the streets.

By the time we arrived, the battle was over and our side had taken heavy casualties. I looked around to see if there was any sign of the attackers. All I could see was at least a dozen of our boys lying dead on the ground. All that was left of them was scorched bodies. Their flesh was black and cracked in places. Most of their uniforms looked as if they had been set on fire. Their weapons lay close at hand, buckled and melted as if someone had thrown them into very intense flame.

Anton studied the survivors. There were half a dozen of them and they all looked pale-faced and frightened. I clutched my shotgun very close and surveyed the streets. The battle had taken place in a narrow alleyway close to a main thoroughfare. Some of the mountains of trash piled up against the walls still burned. Thick, oily stinking smoke rose above them. The corpses of roasted rats lay nearby. Cockroaches the size of dinner-plates had exploded in the heat.

I looked up and I could see the towering tenements rising hundreds of storeys above me. I wondered if our boys had come under attack from ambush and whether someone was still lurking on the balconies of the tenements waiting to take shots at us.

One thing I could not see was any sign of the people who had attacked. I looked around very carefully for bodies. There were probably two score civilians but none of them had any weapons.

I surmised that the survivors had gathered up the guns and taken them for themselves because I could not see any sign of flamethrowers or the sort of heavy weapons that would have resulted in this sort of loss. Some of these soldiers looked as if they'd been hit by a lascannon. There were a number of people heavily wounded – they had suffered very bad burns. The last time I had seen people who look like that, they had been dragged from the cockpits of burning tanks. Most of them had not lived very long afterwards.

Anton walked over to one of the survivors of the company. 'How many of them attacked you?' He sounded as cocky and arrogant as usual but he was just trying to be friendly.

The soldier looked up at Anton as if he was an idiot, a thing that Anton must have been very used to by now. 'Just the one,' he said.

Anton shook his head and made a low tut-tutting sound. He walked over to another soldier; this one's face was all smudged with soot as if he had been standing next to a blazing building or perhaps had worked in one of the forges back on Belial. 'How many of them attacked you?' Anton asked again.

The soldier looked up at Anton and shook his head. 'You heard Boris,' he said. 'Are you deaf?'

Anton turned around and looked at us, his face blank. He made a circling motion with his little finger close to the side of his forehead. He quite clearly thought that the soldiers had been made just a little bit crazy by what they had just been through. We had all seen that before. He went over to third soldier and said, 'How many?'

'One, you moron,' said the soldier. Anton's eyes narrowed and I was not sure whether it was because of the insult or because of the information that the soldier had imparted. It was starting to look as if there was no mistake here.

I walked over to the first soldier that Anton had talked to and I squatted

down beside him. I offered him a lho stick from one of my packs and he took it and stuffed it into his mouth gratefully. I produced my igniter and he squirmed away at the sight of the flame as if it brought back some terrible memory.

'Just one of them did all this?' I kept my voice flat and level and did not let any fraction of emotion show. He took a long puff on the lho stick and he nodded. A cloud of smoke emerged from his lips and he pulled it back in again with a long breath as if he somehow thought that he could cover the smell of burning flesh that surrounded him with the odour of tobacco.

'That's right,' he said. 'Just the one.'

'Was he in a Hellhound, complete with a flamethrower attached?' Anton asked. He was never the most sensitive of souls.

'He was a psyker, one of those priests,' the soldier said. The others nodded agreement. I saw Anton flinch. I did too. None of us liked the idea of having to face a psyker. Regimental rumour had it that an unbonded psyker could be possessed by daemons. It was one of the truths preached by the Imperial cult and none of us had any reason to doubt it. Ivan gave out a low whistle. It was the one he used to indicate that he was disturbed. The New Boy looked as pale as the soldiers who had been fighting against the psyker. I don't suppose I looked any better.

The first soldier continued to puff away at the lho stick. His eyes were focused on its burning. It looked as if he was seeing something strange there. Maybe he was. Who can tell?

'We got a call,' he said. 'We were told that there was a heretic preacher ranting in the street and that someone had better come and do something.'

'You did,' Anton said.

'We arrived in force,' the soldier said. 'We did not know what to expect but we thought we were prepared for the worst.'

He shook his head, considering how silly that statement sounded now. 'There was a preacher here – he was dressed in simple robes and he was telling the crowd how the Angel of Fire would return and scour the face of this world, cleansing it of unbelievers. The commissar ordered Honza and Johan to go forwards and arrest him. The rest of us were to watch in case of ambush. There was an ambush all right – it just did not come the way we expected it.'

'The preacher was a psyker?' The New Boy looked frightened as he spoke.

The soldier nodded his head.

‘As soon as Honza and Johan got close, he just laughed and called upon the Angel of Fire to smite the heretics. That’s when it happened–’

‘What?’ Anton asked.

‘Wings of fire erupted from his back and a halo of flame surrounded his head. He gestured with his hands and Honza and Johan were burned down on the spot. They just caught alight – one second they were there, the next second they were surrounded with just as much flame as the preacher. The only difference was that it burned them; it did not burn him.’

‘You opened fire?’ Anton said.

‘Of course we did,’ the soldier said. ‘Some of us tried hard not to hit our boys but most of us just fired our lasguns. We might as well have been using flashlights for all the difference it made. The bolts from our lasguns just seemed to make the preacher stronger and he kept invoking the name of the Angel and telling us that we were all going to be destroyed. The sacred flame was going to cleanse this world and we should repent.’

‘I take it you didn’t,’ Anton said. I stared at him hoping to forestall any more misguided attempts at humour.

‘We kept firing and firing and firing,’ the soldier said. His eyes were fixed in the middle distance now and it was obvious that he was not looking at us but at the scene that the words were pulling from his memory. ‘It didn’t make the slightest difference. It just made him stronger. The commissar told us to stop shooting and use grenades. It was the last order he ever gave. The heretic burned him down where he stood.’

Anton looked at me. His eyes were wide and he looked a little more frightened now. He had always assumed that commissars enjoyed a special protection from the Emperor in return for their faith.

‘Of course, most of the boys just kept on firing. Some of us tried using grenades but there was something in the air around the heretic that sent them flying back towards us. The explosions killed even more of our lads.’

‘But you got the bastard in the end,’ Anton said. ‘Otherwise you would not be sitting here talking to us now.’

The soldier shook his head. ‘Those wings of fire on his back spread wide open and he leapt into the air. It was like something out of one of those old pictures from the time when the Emperor walked among men. He just hovered in the air and threw bolts of fire at us. All the time he was smiling

and laughing and ranting. His voice got louder and when I looked I saw his eyes were glowing, like there was a fire inside his skull.'

My mouth felt dry and I wanted to mock but I could not. The soldier just kept talking. 'He looked happy, ecstatic, there was this glow within him now, getting brighter, as if there was a light inside of him so brilliant it could shine through flesh. He shouted that he was going to meet the Angel and the Angel would come and judge us all then he jumped among us, his body on fire. Everyone he touched just burned. They rolled on the ground, beating at themselves but nothing could put the flames out. The heretic kept on coming. His flesh was being consumed from within now. He was getting thinner and thinner, vanishing like a sugar cube in water. He had almost reached me when he was gone. The flames leapt up all of a sudden and I thought I was dead, but when I opened my eyes there was no one there, except our boys, all burning and dying.'

Anton looked on appalled. Ivan studied something in the middle distance. Corporal Hesse and the New Boy moved around, dispensing med-packs, applying sacred balm.

'You know the worst of it?' the soldier said.

'What?'

'I kept thinking, what if he was right? What if the Angel had blessed him and we were the heretics here and we were all going to be judged?'

'Just as well your commissar got burned,' Anton said. 'If he was alive now you and he would be having words.'

'You never know,' the soldier said. 'He might have agreed with me.'

OceanofPDF.com

Document under seal. Extract From the Decrypted Personal Files of Inquisitor Hyronimus Drake.
Possible evidence of duplicity on the part of former High Inquisitor Drake.
Cross-reference to Exhibit 107D-21H (Report to High Inquisitor Toll).

Walk in the Emperor's Light.

Things are worse in this system than even I feared. The roots of heresy run deep. My agents have interrogated many of the locals and they have a faith in the Angel of Fire that is stronger even than their faith in the Emperor.

My necessarily brief attempts to grasp the history of the local cults have revealed some very disturbing things. The true Imperial cult in this system was long ago subsumed and subverted by the Cult of the Angel of Fire. Its priesthood was diminished until it played a minor role in ritual and rule.

Once I had hopes that the cult might provide a link between our force and the local community, that its leaders could be encouraged to take on the role of advocates for our ways and spearhead the reclamation of this world. This may prove more difficult than I had imagined. No priest of the cult of the Emperor has more than a limited role, and they are not respected by the populace as the priests of the Angel are. Worse yet their ritual and liturgy have been contaminated by long subservience to the Angel Cult. It will be a very long time before this can be changed.

I have prayed and warded my soul and studied the texts of this cult that have fallen into my hands. They are written in High Gothic like the testaments of the True Faith that superficially they resemble.

Many disturbing things have emerged. The role of the Emperor and His holy works has been relegated to the background. He is still portrayed as the font of wisdom and legitimacy, but His role in the parables is that of a remote and distant figure. All of the emphasis in the texts is placed on the part of the Angel of Fire and its saints and prophets. They are portrayed as the intercessors between humanity and the Angel just as the Angel is portrayed as the messenger between them and the Emperor.

This is not the worst of it. It has become obvious that many members of the Cult of the Angel are unbonded psykers. They have caused many casualties among our troops and shown themselves to be beings of considerable power. It is as if the cult deliberately encouraged and cultivated the use of psychic powers and promoted their wielders within its ranks. This raises many dreadful possibilities, not the least being contact with the daemons of Chaos. It is becoming increasingly obvious that the cultists of the Angel have been channelling power from somewhere and I have my suspicions as to the nature of the power on which they are calling.

When I consider the nature of the terrible sacrifices that were made and the structure of the cult who oppose us, I am reminded of many other worlds that have fallen to the most awful of heresies.

Despite the fact that the believers of this world claim to be following a power of light, there is a growing darkness here that needs to be opposed. I pray for the strength to do so.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

‘You ready for when we meet the bastard?’ Anton asked, glaring around the interior of the Chimera. A score of troops looked at him. It was cramped in the compartment and his voice seemed too loud. There was no question of who the bastard was. He could only mean one person: a preacher of the Angel of Fire. The armoured troop carrier raced through the street. There had been another sighting and we had been sent out to break it up and take prisoners if we could.

I pumped the shotgun. It was audible within the armoured hull even over the roar of the vehicle’s engines. ‘What do you think?’

I had listened to all the stories. There were few things that the survivors always agreed on. Las-fire did not slow the psykers. It made them stronger. Grenades might work. They might not. No one really knew. All we knew was that the psykers died eventually but they took a lot more of our boys with them.

‘I think the best thing to do when we meet one is back right off,’ said the New Boy. He was looking serious now, more serious than he had ever done since he first joined us. A few weeks of fighting in the streets and listening to horror stories about rebel psykers had put him in a nervous frame of mind. He was doing his best not to show it.

‘You might well be right,’ said Corporal Hesse. He had raised his voice so that everybody could hear him. ‘If you see one of them, keep your distance. Don’t fire lasguns at him. Use any physical projectile weapons you have

and wait for the heavy weapons to come up. They'll take the bastard down.'

He sounded calm and confident but I knew him too well to be fooled. There was a shiftiness about his eyes and a refusal to meet my gaze that told me he knew that I knew as well.

'They are getting stronger,' the Understudy said. The words just came out in his odd rasping voice. They were toneless. He did not sound frightened but he did not sound particularly sane either.

'Sir?' said Corporal Hesse.

'The psykers are getting stronger. The reports keep coming in. It came down from Headquarters. Something is making them more and more powerful. They are feeding on something or something is feeding them.'

Hesse kept looking at him, waiting for some piece of reassurance. None came. The Understudy just rasped on. 'If we meet one, pin him down. Wait for heavy weapons, reinforcements or our own psykers. Split up. Don't stay in groups. It just makes it easier for them to burn us down with area effects. Don't take cover in the AFVs either. The last few of the Flame worshippers have been powerful enough to take out a Manticore.'

'Anything else, sir?' I asked. I had to admit I was curious in a morbid fashion.

'They'll most likely be accompanied. It seems they have acquired retinues now, guardians who are just as prepared to throw away their lives as the heretic preachers. Some of them will be carrying combustible pyrite. They'll throw themselves among us and the psyker will detonate the package.'

This was new. 'Not heard of that one before,' Anton muttered.

'That's because none of the units who have encountered them have survived. The intelligence was only put together afterwards by field investigation units.'

The Chimera lurched just like my stomach. This was not the sort of thing that I wanted to hear. None of us did. The Understudy just kept talking. 'It seems they have found a way to keep their psykers alive and still inflict enormous casualties on us.'

In one way it was good or it ought to have been. It should have made the preachers less frightening. It showed they had some regard for their own lives. It didn't though.

'There are other reports,' the Understudy added, almost as an afterthought.

Every man present was silent. All of us stared at him. Anton licked his lips. ‘These have not been confirmed but it seems that some of the pyrite carriers have been transformed.’

‘Transformed, sir?’ Hesse asked.

‘They become monsters of living flame; avatars of the Angel of Fire, some of the reports call them.’

‘He really doesn’t want us here, does he, sir?’ Anton said.

‘Who, Antoniev?’

‘The Angel of Fire, sir.’

‘It does not matter what the Angel of Fire wants,’ the Understudy said. ‘It matters what the Emperor commands.’

I believed him. The way he said it, you had to. The Chimera ground to a halt. The metal blast doors were thrown open. We deployed into the street.

They were waiting for us to show up. Our Chimeras had rumbled up to the plaza where a heretic was preaching sedition. Around us massive hab-blocks loomed. Great sign-boards still showed images of the Angel of Fire, flickering animated scenes from its holy books, miracles performed by its saints, burning-headed fanatics exhorting belief.

Nearby a group of enforcers waited. Either the crowd was too large for them or, more likely, because they were locals the majority of them did not want to take action.

We took up position, covering them with our lasguns. The locals looked at us. I could see that the vast majority of them were edgy, stuck in that no-man’s-land between fear and anger. A bunch of them were armed but they did not like the idea of facing units of fully trained soldiers with armoured back-up.

There was something else though, something in the air, a feeling of anticipation, of hunger maybe. Or maybe that is just my imagination looking back on the thing. It seemed to me that an ominous presence hovered over everything. The Understudy gestured for us to advance. We moved towards the crowd. For a moment, they stood their ground but then their nerve broke and they split apart. Small channels appeared in the midst of the mass of people. We moved forwards at a run, wary, wanting to seize the leaders and get this over with. As we did so the crowd began to scatter, all except the core of ringleaders who waited for us, smirking. I think we all

knew what was coming. I was very glad I had a shotgun and not the standard issue las-weapon.

‘Behold the Unbelievers,’ said a tall man with the unmistakable aura of authority. ‘They have come from beyond the stars to die here.’

‘Oh shut it,’ shouted Anton. ‘I am sick of listening to your sort.’

It was not the smartest thing to do but Anton had never been the smartest man. The heretic glared at him and raised an arm and a halo of flames played around his head. ‘You are doomed, stick man, and you are blessed. You will be purified by the sacred fires of the Angel. He will burn the sin from your soul.’

He gestured at Anton. I pulled the trigger of the shotgun. The shell broke up en route to its target, coming apart in a spray of molten metal. It never reached the heretic priest but burning hot pellets landed amid his followers. They grimaced but they did not shriek. They were prepared for martyrdom.

My shot distracted the priest. The bolt of fire he threw at Anton went off target, creating a splashing puddle of flame at the skinny bastard’s feet. Anton leapt back as if his boots were on fire. Despite orders, a bunch of the lads opened up. Many of the heretics went down. Our boys were not being entirely stupid. They were not shooting at the priest but his followers. A group of them went down. One of them exploded. He was obviously wearing a pyrite shirt. The wash of flame swept out over them. The priest laughed and shouted praises to the Angel.

About half of the heretics were down. The remainder were transformed. They became larger and far more terrifying. They burned like dry wood but they kept moving and shrieking and laughing like madmen. Halos of flame surrounded their charring bodies, making them seem much larger. You could see a moving man in the core of an infernal monster. They came closer. The sickly sweet smell of burning flesh filled the air along with the muted blast-furnace roar of the strange magic that animated them still.

‘Disperse,’ the Understudy shouted. ‘Don’t let them close! Don’t let them grab you!’

The boys did not need to be told twice. They fanned out. The crowd was already in motion, trying to get as far away from the burning fanatics as possible. I took aim and fired at one of the blazing figures. The shell hit him in the chest. What was left of the human being within flew apart. It was as if I had shot at a statue made of ash. The flames surrounding him

momentarily flickered but then pulled back together again. There was no martyr left now, only an elemental that burned ever brighter as if consuming the soul of the dead man for fuel.

Foolishly I shot at it again. It was exactly like putting a shell into a flame. It went straight through and out the other side. The priest was shrieking instructions to his surviving minions now. The monster I had fired upon rushed straight towards me, a roughly humanoid outline of roaring flame. From the retreating crowd guns opened up. The fanatics were not alone after all and we had walked right into an ambush.

There was not a lot I could do. I turned and ran, knowing that agonising death was at my heels. I seemed to hear the roar of its flames coming ever closer. I heard something else above that. The scream of aircraft engines. It seemed like support was coming our way although what it could achieve against the supernatural horror following me I was not at all sure.

I cursed the thing and turned at bay, wanting to at least face the thing that killed me. It wasn't there. Some idiot had opened fire on it with a lasgun and it was racing towards them, not in the least affected by the blindingly bright bolts. As I watched it enveloped the shooter and turned him into a human bonfire. Whoever it was died screaming.

Autogun bullets kicked up dust at my feet and reminded me that the elemental martyrs were not the only threat. A small group of local gangers were taking pot-shots at me, for all the world as if they were in some plaza tormenting pigeon-bats. I turned the shotgun on them. It discouraged them from their sport. Permanently.

Things in the plaza were chaotic. Our lads had dispersed. The elementals chased them down. In the centre of it all, the priest of the Angel of Fire chanted his strange litany. There was an evil exultation in his voice. An aura of flame played around his head. Wings of fire emerged from his back.

Hate twisted my guts, pure visceral loathing for the fanatic and what he was doing. Mad rage filled my mind. I strode towards him, fumbling at my belt for a grenade. I had a clear run at him. His pet fire daemons were busy slaughtering our lads. I was never going to get a better chance.

He saw me but it troubled him not a jot. I was beneath his notice now that he was filled with the spirit of his master. He had to control his pets while they slaughtered my comrades. One lowly Guardsman was not something that made him feel threatened. I lobbed the grenade at him. It exploded in

the air near him, detonated by the aura around him. The force of the blast sent him staggering back. The elementals flickered like a dying blaze. I thought if I can only keep this up I have got him. Then I looked into his blazing eyes and I knew that I had run out of time.

At that point there was a sound like thunder. I flinched, convinced that the heretic had blasted me with his fiery power. I closed my eyes expecting a surge of agony to rip through my body. Instead, I saw the huge black-armoured figure of a Space Marine before me. He had charged the priest with a chainsword and lopped off a limb. Whatever power protected the heretic from our weapons, it was not enough to save him from the wrath of the Emperor's chosen. An enormous wave of psychic power smashed down from above. Looking up I saw another Space Marine standing in the doorway of a Thunderhawk gunship. This one's face was visible. Elaborate skull-mask paint concealed his features. A bolt of power emerged from a black spot on the Imperial psyker's forehead. It warred with the flaming shield around the heretic psyker, suppressing it, while his comrade chopped the heretic down.

With the death of the priest, the elementals dissipated. The Space Marines smashed into the crowd. There was only a score of them but they did more damage in a few seconds than our entire company had done in the entire battle. A few heartbeats after their arrival the remainder of the heretics were in flight or surrendered, demoralised by the onset of the Death Spectres.

I stood and watched, awed by the power and majesty of the Emperor's angels. One of them passed me and clapped me gently on the back. Maybe it was an accident. I like to think he had seen me standing my ground and was complimenting me on my bravery. Hopefully he did not notice that my eyes were closed as I faced death.

Looking at the scene of carnage, listening to the distant rumble of bolter fire, I realised this had been a trap for the heretics and we had been the bait. It was the battle of the factorum all over again albeit on a smaller scale. I could not find it in my heart to resent that fact. At least the High Command had given us a chance to survive which was more than the previous companies who had encountered the priesthood of The Angel of Fire had got. The Death Spectres had saved us.

I looked around to see if any of the others were still alive. I found them clustered around a Space Marine watching him with slack-jawed awe. They

looked as if they expected him to perform a miracle before their very eyes. Personally I would not have been surprised if he had. There was something vastly reassuring about the presence of these massive, black-armoured figures. I felt safe in their shadow. While they were there nothing could harm us. No threat was too terrible to be faced. They radiated power and confidence. You felt something of the distant majesty of the Emperor himself. These were his chosen.

Guardsmen reached out to touch their armour as they passed. It was a thing they would tell their comrades in decades to come. Others bent their knees as they would before a priest. I doubt the Death Spectres noticed.

Even as I watched I heard the massive figure say something into the comm-net. I moved closer and I heard something about a hulk moving in-system.

The Death Spectre gestured to his comrades and they returned to their vehicles and departed. There was something urgent in their manner as if they had been summoned to some new and important duty. Within minutes they were gone and the only sign they had ever been there were the corpses they had left spread across the square.

The Guardsmen watched them go in silence. The locals did too, such as had been spared. Dozens of them were on their knees babbling and praying for mercy or forgiveness. It seemed they had for once witnessed a force as capable of filling them with awe as the minions of the Angels of Fire.

The body collectors had already scuttled out of hiding and were loading the dead onto their trolleys.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Rumours abounded in the Angel's Blessing that night. The city was on the verge of open rebellion. Macharius had been wounded at the new war front. Macharius had been killed. The Death Spectres had gone off-world to deal with an ork invasion fleet. Plague had erupted on Karsk V and would be coming our way soon. We sat in the dark and drank our rotgut and tried not to pay too much attention. We were looking for distraction. That night the girls brought a friend. She was tall, dark, and strikingly pretty with dark hair cut very short. Her name was Anna. I studied her as she sat oppoite me. She seemed quiet and self-possessed and calm. She had the competence that nurses always have but she was distant.

'She's as new around here as you are,' Yanis said, as if making a joke.

'What do you mean?' I asked.

Anna smiled a little coldly, I thought. 'She means I just transferred in to St Oberon's. I was working two levels down in the old Flat Tunnel Hospice.'

'Might as well have come from another planet,' said Yanis. There was some tension between the two. 'It's a different world down there.'

'It's poorer, if that's what you mean,' said Anna. 'But people still need healing.'

'I never said they didn't.'

'It is different down there,' Anna said. 'Darker, more dismal. The nobles who come to St Oberon's have no idea what it's like.' She let that hang in the air, with the implication it was not just the nobles.

‘It’s always the bloody same,’ said Anton. ‘The higher up the hive you go, the snottier people get.’ That got him some nasty looks from the other nurses. Not that Anton cared. He never paid too much attention to what other people thought.

Katrina looked at the table and said, ‘Do we need to talk about this? There are other more interesting things to talk about. I’ve never been out of the hive, let alone to a different planet, neither have you, Yanis or Anna. You boys have. What was it like?’

‘Dangerous,’ said Anton. ‘The bloody places always seemed full of people who wanted to shoot us for some reason.’

Ivan gave him a dark look. ‘It’s understandable. I feel that way every time I look at you.’

‘Ha bloody ha!’

Katrina’s attempt to change the subject and the booze worked though. We spoke of the campaigns we had fought in – Jurasik, Elijah, Lucifer and the others. We did not talk about anything we were doing at present but it would not have mattered very much – if they had been spies they could have learned a lot just from the stories we told of the old times and about the battles we had fought in. It did not seem very likely that they were spies although you can never tell. Little did I know…

‘Tell me about the Angel of Fire,’ the New Boy asked.

I frowned at the way he spoke. It seemed to me that he was more interested in the Angel of Fire than he ought to have been. He was a studious lad with a scholarly turn of mind and this was his first campaign and his first time off the leash on an alien world. He was curious about everything – I suppose if I had been in the same situation I would have been too. My friends were drunk and I knew what they were thinking anyway so I concentrated on the girls, wondering about their response.

It was interesting. Anna and Yanis wore the conventional pious look of the faithful. Lutzka looked blank and far more interested in her drink. Katrina looked angry and stared off into the distance, biting her lower lip and frowning. I wondered what she was thinking so I asked. She just shook her head and looked even more angry and then she got up and stalked away towards the ladies room. Anton looked at me annoyed as if I had done something wrong. ‘What was that all about?’ He asked of no one in particular. The other girls looked embarrassed and a little afraid.

‘Her brother was burned by the Sons of the Flame,’ Yanis said at last.

‘He was not the only one, judging by the number of cages I have seen recently,’ said Anton with his usual mastery of the diplomatic arts.

‘It’s not that common,’ Yanis said.

‘It looks as if they burned thousands,’ said Anton.

‘And what are thousands or even tens of thousands in all the millions that a hive contains.’

‘It matters to the thousands,’ I said.

‘It teaches the rest of us to respect the Angel,’ said Anna. ‘You need to be firm to keep a hive under control.’ I thought I heard an implied criticism there; that we were not being firm enough with the locals. Maybe she felt things were starting to spin out of control.

‘So what was Katrina’s brother being taught to respect?’ I asked.

‘Ask her,’ she said, not responding well to the aggression in my voice. Maybe I had had too much to drink. ‘It’s not my business to say. I am new here.’

‘I’ll tell you,’ said Lutzka. ‘They are burned for their own good.’

We all turned to look at her. She seemed to deflate a little then her jaw firmed and she said, ‘Well, it’s true.’

‘Would you care to explain that?’ I asked.

‘You’re not very nice,’ Anna said.

‘Because I want an explanation?’

‘Because you have a nasty manner.’

‘I would still like to know how you burn someone alive for their own good. Call me an apostate but I can’t see how that works.’

‘Their souls go to join the Angel,’ said Lutzka. There was a dreamy look in her eye, the sort you sometimes see on the faces of the really devout when they are at prayer. ‘The flames cleanse them of their sins and they join his choir purified and free of the bonds of flesh.’

‘I doubt there is much flesh left on them at this stage,’ I said.

‘Scoff if you like but it’s what it says in scripture.’

The New Boy rubbed his eye and said, ‘They say that the psykers the Black Ships take join the Emperor. Might this not be the same?’

‘I don’t think you can compare the Emperor with the Angel of Fire,’ said Anton. He sounded outraged. Maybe it was the drink.

‘Why not? They say that the Angel of Fire stands at his right hand.’ Lutzka

said. I could see the girls nodding.

‘Only on this world,’ said Ivan. ‘I think if it was true we would have heard of it on Belial and all the other worlds.’

‘How do you know it’s not?’ Anna sounded annoyed now at the faith being called into question. ‘Have you visited every world in the galaxy?’

It was a fair point. Silence fell. I wondered why she had pushed things so far. She could be arrested for trying to undermine morale. Strictly according to regulations we should be locking her up and taking her for trial. The girls looked at us. Most of them pushed their chairs back, as if trying to put some distance between them and Anna but at the same time there was approval in their faces. Anna had said something they had all thought, had voiced their resentments for them. Maybe all she was trying to do was fit in, a new girl in a new place trying to make new friends. She did not realise it could get her killed.

Anton and Ivan looked at me. They knew as well as I did that things could go very sour very quickly from here.

‘No, we haven’t, but in this we are right,’ I said, staring at her very hard, hoping she would take the hint, realise what she was doing. ‘I am sure that in your heart of hearts you feel the truth of that.’

She kept staring at me challengingly. Inwardly I cursed her. She was really so drunk and stubborn that she could not see what was happening here. I held her gaze and slowly her eyes sank and her face flushed.

‘You are right,’ she said eventually. Her hand played with the small ikon of the Angel of Fire that rested between her breasts.

The next morning I sat up and pulled on my tunic. Anna stirred in the bed beside me. Her hair was mussed. Her eyes were full of sleep. She looked very pretty. Her face was chilly for a moment then she smiled and it brightened wonderfully.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked.

‘I’ve got to report for duty,’ I said. I could not say any more.

‘If you stick around we can have some breakfast,’ she said. ‘There is a stall in the corridor that does the best skewered drop-frog.’

‘Sounds like a prime local delicacy,’ I said. I checked her clock. I still had an hour before I had to report. My head felt thick and muzzy. My mouth felt dry. I remembered leaving the bar with her early in the morning and a long

walk to this hab-block. I remembered endless corridors and endless alcoves all filled with statues of the Angel.

I looked at the room. There were the usual small personal belongings you find in a hab-cell. Some pictures of Anna as a girl with her family, some little trinkets – sacred prints, knick-knacks. You can see them in a billion, billion hab-cells anywhere in the galaxy.

She looked at the pictures on the tabletop as if some memory were coming back to her. I reached out a hand to help her up. She rose to her feet lightly, but as I tugged, just for a moment, before she got into motion, she felt heavier than she looked. I remembered getting the same impression last night when I had lifted her onto the bed. I put it down to drunkenness then but it was odd that it had returned now.

‘You want to go get breakfast?’

‘Sure,’ I said.

There were people in the corridors outside the hab-cell. Just like on Belial, there is no real quiet time in a hab-block. People are always coming and going. One or two of them stared at my uniform but not for long when I stared back. A group of young gangers shouted abuse from a crossroads. They were armed. So was I. It made for a tense few moments. Anna looked a lot calmer than I would have expected but I supposed she was used to such sights. They were common enough on Belial where I grew up as well. Anna did not look at all troubled. At the time, I thought that perhaps she was just used to such things from her experience in the underhive. Or that maybe my presence reassured her.

Fortunately the gangers were not on blaze or any of the other synthetics. Otherwise there might have been trouble. They just wanted to let everybody know how tough they were.

We found the stall Anna mentioned. It was crowded with people. Mostly workers coming or going from their shifts. Again most of them looked at me. There were odd tensions written on people’s faces, as if they knew something I did not. Uneasiness settled in my stomach. I told myself it was just my imagination.

I let Anna order for both of us and I paid. She was right. The food was good. We ate in silence for a while with that odd embarrassment that two people feel when they have gone to bed drunk with a stranger and then have to make conversation in the morning.

‘How long do you think you will be in Irongrad?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know.’ I really didn’t but I would not have told her anyway if I had. Regulations. ‘When do you have to go to work?’

‘It’s an off half-day for me. That’s why we were all in the bar last night. My shift doesn’t start until noon.’

‘Lucky you,’ I said.

‘Lucky me,’ she agreed. ‘You get any off-days?’

‘A soldier of the Emperor is always on duty,’ I said. It was the sort of thing the square-jawed hero always said in the prop-novs Anton read. She laughed.

‘You don’t take me seriously,’ I said.

‘I think you are a very serious man.’

I took another bite of some sort of flat-bread. It was tough and chewy but not unpleasant. There was some kind of protein baked in.

‘Would you really report me to your commissar?’ she asked quietly. I was glad she was so cautious. I remembered threatening to do some such thing during our argument the previous night. I thought it funny what could spark a night of passion. I remembered saying other things as well.

‘It’s what I am supposed to do,’ I said. ‘Otherwise I imperil my soul as well as yours.’

She considered that for a moment. I could see she was turning things over in her mind. At least I thought that then.

‘What are they like, your commissars?’

‘They are not gentle with unbelievers,’ I said. ‘Or with anybody else for that matter.’

‘Why did you become a soldier? Were you conscripted?’

‘I volunteered, believe it or not. It’s most likely one of the reasons we are talking.’

‘How so?’

‘The Imperial Guard are the elite of the planetary levies. One of the things they look for is superior motivation. Volunteers have more of that than conscripts.’

‘You volunteered out of a desire to fight then. You wanted to do your duty out of love of the Emperor.’ There was a sarcastic tone to her voice that needled me a little. Maybe it was meant to.

I shook my head. ‘Anton and Ivan and I were wanted by a gang boss. He

would have killed us if we had stayed on in the hive and kept working at the guild factorum. The Guard was a way out.'

'You worked in a factorum?'

'Yes.'

'What did you make?'

'Gear sprockets for tanks.'

'I can't really picture you doing that.'

'I can easily picture you as a nurse,' I said. I could too. She had a coolness about her that told you she would behave well under pressure. And there was a detachment to her as well, I thought for a moment.

She laughed and it made her look younger and suddenly I liked her. You know how it is.

She looked at me sidelong as if a thought had just struck her.

'What is it?' I asked.

'It's strange. For so long we were isolated here. We only traded with the other worlds in the system. The Imperium was just a legend. Now, you are here, telling us we are part of it, that we never left it.'

I tried to imagine what it must be like for her. This world had only been contacted by rogue traders for millennia. Those contacts could easily have been centuries apart. The Imperium itself had only made contact a decade ago. The rulers of the world had pretended not to believe in the legitimacy of the contact. They had ruled too long to give up power without a fight.

I had a vision too of the strangeness of it all. The Angel of Fire Cult had grown up on this world in a time when there had been no contact with the true faith of the Imperium. It has its roots in the same theology but had grown wild and strange, mutated over all those long centuries of isolation. Who knew what had really happened here, how the Sons of the Flame had gained their powers. No one could challenge them with the Imperial truth and slowly and surely they had bent the faith of an entire system of worlds to their will and now plunged that system into an unwinnable war with the Imperium of Man.

'You are looking thoughtful,' Anna said.

'It's nothing,' I said, looking around, suddenly very aware that I was a long way from home and surrounded by strangers. I felt oddly vulnerable although there was no menace in any of the faces around me. Overhead though, the Angel of Fire's thousand metal incarnations stared down at me

with their blind eyes. I sat in the shadow of its fiery wings.

‘I have to go,’ I said. Something in the back of mind told me I had better be getting back.

When I got to the barracks everything was in a frenzy of activity. I entered our room and saw that the others were already there.

‘Where have you been?’ Anton asked. He looked more than a little upset.

‘I think you can guess if you cast your mind back to last night,’ I said. ‘There was a girl involved…’

‘You haven’t heard then?’

‘Heard what?’

‘There’s been a massive heretic counter-attack, backed up by space-drops. Macharius has been shot. Some say he has been killed.’

I looked from face to face to see if they were kidding me. All of them looked equally serious just like all the others I had seen on my way in.

‘That’s not possible,’ I said.

Their expressions told me that they thought differently.

OceanofPDF.com

Exhibit 107D-21G Abstract of Report VII – XII – MIVIII
To: High Inquisitor Jeremiah Toll, Sanctum Ultimus, Dalton's Spire.
Source: Drake, Hyronimus, high inquisitor attached to the Grand Army of Reconquest.
Document under seal. Possible evidence of duplicity on the part of former High Inquisitor Drake. Cross-reference to decrypted personal journals. See Exhibit 107D-45G.

Walk in the Emperor's Light.

I know the question you are asking yourself, I have asked it myself – how could one mere system, a group of worlds orbiting a single sun, withstand the full might of the Imperial armies that Macharius has at his command?

The answer is that it takes a very long time to organise an Imperial crusade and it takes an even longer time for all of the elements of that crusade to be put into place. There are complications that are not immediately obvious as well. Interstellar travel is far from predictable. Whole fleets of transport ships have been lost as they journey through the under-space of the warp.

The Lord High Commander has done a superlative job of organisation, but I begin to suspect elements of the Munitorum and even the Administratum may be working against him. Imperial politics can lead to all manner of betrayals. There are those who dream of a return to the chaos of the Schism and the free hand they enjoyed during it.

In the case of Karsk there were five inhabited planets in a system of twenty-seven worlds. Each of those worlds helds at least five hive cities and in some cases as many as forty. Each of those hive cities contained

enormous armaments factories and populations numbering in the tens of millions. All of those armies were defending their homelands and knew their way around. All of them started already concentrated and highly motivated. The wonder of it is not that the system managed to resist us but that we scored so many victories so early. I put that down entirely to the planning of Macharius. His entire army had not yet arrived and already we had seized three of the five hives on one of the major industrial worlds.

Initially, we had the benefit of the element of surprise and we descended upon Karsk IV like a sledgehammer dropping from space. We took Irongrad before our enemies had any chance to realise what was happening and the swiftness of our victory demoralised them. At least to begin with. However, the governor managed to get away to Karsk IV where his brother had already begun to organise relief armies and very soon the fightback had begun.

I have been told that the Imperial Navy ought to have been able to control the space between the worlds but something happened which gave the heretics a chance to break out of their worlds and begin relieving Karsk V. I still am not sure what. One rumour has it that the admiral took umbrage at some of Sejanus's remarks about his uniform and withdrew his fleets temporarily. It sounds so stupid I can almost believe it. The most likely reason is that they have come under attack by a hulk that has drifted in-system. The matter is pending investigation. The Death Spectres have taken it on themselves to investigate. This could not have happened at a worse time.

Even though we control the comm-net in the cities, word has managed to get out to the local population. They have gone from being sullen but neutral to being actively hostile. I suspect that the priesthood of the Angel of Fire is responsible. It appears they have their own methods of communicating between worlds and I have my suspicions as to how.

In a hive of millions it does not take an enormous percentage of the young, violent and disenfranchised to turn against us to provide our enemies the basis for recruiting a powerful army. Irongrad is a major producer of weapons. The cult of the Angel of Fire has a huge number of contacts in the Temple factorums. I suspect it is easy for our enemies to arm their new recruits. Of course, they were also a priesthood and have had a hold of the souls and imaginations of an enormous number of the local people.

Generations of preaching had seen to that. The situation here is potentially explosive and becoming more so every day.

And our forces are coming under attack by the worshippers of the Angel of Fire, potent psykers who seem able to draw upon the darkest and most hellish powers. This too is a matter pending investigation. I have given orders that one of these priests must be taken alive. So far that has proven to be a problem.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

‘I don’t believe it,’ Anton said. He was sitting on his bed in the barracks, his prop-nov hanging loosely in his hand. ‘Macharius cannot be dead.’

‘I heard he had just lost a leg,’ said Ivan. ‘That’s what Fat Mikal down in the kitchens says.’

Anton shook his head. ‘He was a great man.’

‘He’s not dead yet,’ I said. ‘We’ve not heard any word of that.’

‘Yeah, they’ll come and tell you won’t they?‘

‘There would be an announcement,’ I said. ‘A day of mourning, at least.’

‘Not if they want to keep it from us.’

‘Why would they want to do that?’

‘You know as well as I do the effect that his death would have on morale.’

‘It’s good to see you are doing your bit to keep it up then. I am glad you are not one to give in to despair. Or help spread it.’

‘Damn!’ Anton said. He got up and kicked the bed. The metal of the frame rang. You could tell from his expression that he had hurt himself but was just too stubborn to admit it. ‘Finally, we had a competent commander in charge. Finally we were getting somewhere. Now this. It’s so bad even the Space Marines are deserting us.’

‘I would not say that too loudly if I were you,’ I said.

‘Why not? It’s true.’

He was right. The Death Spectres had departed. No one knew why or where. Or if they did they were not telling us. They had been summoned

elsewhere or else were being dispatched.

‘For one, if you say it too loud, they’ll never adopt you into their Chapter. For another, a commissar might hear you and decide to put you on bullet-stopping duty.’

‘I don’t see one here,’ said Anton. ‘You planning on reporting me?’

‘The only thing I will report is your stupidity. You seem to be scaling new heights of it at the moment.’

Ivan whistled ironically to show what he thought about our bickering. The New Boy rushed into the room and said, ‘Macharius is here!’

‘In the building?’ Anton asked.

‘In Irongrad. He was flown in from the battle front. He’s at the Hospice of Saint Oberon.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Word just came in to Command. I heard one of the company scribes talking as he was on his way to give the report to the captain.’

‘You sure?’ Anton asked.

‘If you don’t believe me, go ask him yourself. Where is the hospice anyway? Isn’t that where the girls are?’

‘Yeah, it’s down by the cathedral, near the hive core-zone,’ Anton said. He picked up his lasgun. ‘I’m going down there.’

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘In case any of those Angel worshippers show up and...’ He looked embarrassed now.

‘And?’ I said, not willing to let him off the hook.

‘And so I can pray for him.’

‘You can do that just as well here,’ I said.

‘I’d feel better doing it there.’

Ivan stood up. ‘I’ll go with you.’

‘Me too,’ said the New Boy.

‘What about you, Leo? You coming?’ Anton asked. I considered it for a moment. After all, what difference would my presence down by the hospice make? I felt all three of them staring at me. There was something accusing in their gaze.

‘All right,’ I said. ‘Let’s go.’

Apparently we were not the only people with the idea. The square outside

the Hospice of St Oberon was full of off-duty Guardsmen. There were thousands of them. We looked like an army about to lay siege to the place. Soldiers stood around and smoked and ate street food and talked in subdued voices. You would have thought we were all in the sick room of a dying relative from the expressions on everyone's faces.

The hospice itself was a massive building made from an orange local stone. It looked more like a fortress than a hospital. It was twenty storeys high, low compared to the surrounding hab-blocks but massive all the same. It felt enormously solid. It seemed to have been designed to resist a siege or withstand a direct hit from heavy artillery.

There were Leman Russ tanks drawn up all around it and I could make out ratling snipers on the balconies and in among the metal angels that clutched the thick walls. It seemed that no chances were being taken with security. Soldiers on guard checked everyone who went into the building. The girls had not been exaggerating. It was a famous place apparently, with the best chirurgeons on the planet.

For once there were more than the statues of the Angel of Fire to look at. The entrance was a massive arch. On one side was the inevitable flame-winged angel ten times the height of a man. On the other side was a massive muscular warrior who looked more like a master-sergeant than a saint. In one hand he held a bolt pistol, in the other he held a blazing torch. His foot was on the neck of an ork. Five ork heads hung from his belt. He gazed on the Angel with a face rapt in worshipful contemplation. I was guessing this was the Blessed Oberon of local legend.

Looking around I saw many of the soldiers came from the same regiments. They were all part of the old Guard who had followed Macharius right from the beginning. They wore green uniforms with gold trim and their helmets were an odd shape, an odd, ancient-looking shape more suited to a tribe from a feral world. They had nose and cheek guards but left the lower half of the face visible at the front while sweeping all the way down the neck at the back. Many of them wore the lion's head insignia of Macharius's family on their gear.

There were soldiers of the Grey Legions of Asterion all in silver and grey, with their metal collars on their neck symbolising servitude to the Emperor. There were short solid men from Trask in the red and black of the Ninth Hussars. Some of them had brought their horses. They had just come from

crowd control duty in the Cathedral Square. There were ogryns and ratlings and one or two commissars. I don't know whether they were there out of respect for Macharius or to keep an eye on the rest of us. I am guessing it was the former but you never know.

There were moments when all conversation seemed to stop and everyone looked towards the great arched doorway. It was not silent. You could still hear the industrial noise of the hive city, the roar of the gas-jet flames, the wheezing bellow's breath of the air-circulation systems, the distant rumble of the elevated railroads. It was odd and awe-inspiring to see so many quiet men with rapt faces, lost in thought, and you've got to remember that many of these were not the sort of men given over to brainwork. I think we were all wondering about Macharius, and his fate in an odd way was a mirror image of our own.

It was not difficult for us to empathise with him. Every soldier in a Guard regiment dwells on wounds and death at some point. Many of us have taken a hit and all of us have known someone who has. All of us dread that wound that will cripple us, leave us limbless or blinded. All of us fear it as much as death. Many of us have waited for comrades to die of their wounds. In that moment I think everyone present saw in Macharius a reflection of all the wounded brothers, friends and comrades we had lost, and all of us were waiting to see if we had lost another.

We waited for hours, but no word came. In the end we departed, summoned back to duty, still not knowing how things went with the Lord High Commander.

Our temporary captain of our temporary company summoned us into his august presence the next morning. All of us wondered what was going on. We could not think of anything we had done to earn his wrath but, as ever, the fact that we could not conjure up anything did not mean there were not reasons. It's a rule in the Guard that they can always find a motive for punishment if they want.

The captain did not look annoyed when we entered his chamber. It was a large room that had once been some sort of scriptorium by the look of it. Dozens of desks lined the walls and dozens of clerks made notes in great ledgers still. This time they were probably totting up the ammunition we had used rather than the number of cogwheels shipped.

The captain was sitting on a great padded leather chair while his batman shaved his cheeks with a cut-throat razor. The usual cabal of junior officers preened themselves around him, admiring their reflections in the array of portable mirrors the batman had set up. Some of them had more gold on their epaulettes than I would get if I looted a bank vault.

‘Ah there you are, lads!’ he murmured as if delighted to see us. His voice was very quiet for an officer and you had to strain to hear him. I suspect that was the effect he desired. It made him stand out in an army where those in charge could be reliably expected to boom, bellow and shout. We stood at attention and waited for him to clarify the situation. The batman towelled his face and the captain ran his hand over his tanned cheeks to check for any remaining stubble. A small tight smile told us he had not found any. He stroked his well-clipped moustache for a moment as if encouraging it to speak.

‘I have a special duty for you all,’ the moustache said. The captain’s lips did not seem to move so it must have been the whiskers speaking. We kept our faces stony. Special duty covers a multitude of potentially lethal options. I wondered if I was about to be volunteered for a suicide mission.

The captain obviously understood what was going through our minds. He was not nearly as dim as he chose to appear. He laughed his fruity laugh and murmured, ‘It’s nothing dreadful, I can assure you. In fact it is a very great honour. ‘

We looked at him and kept our mouths closed. ‘As you may know General Macharius was wounded while investigating the front lines at Pentegrad. He was inspecting our forward positions when a squad of heretic fanatics attacked. He managed to fight his way clear with some of his bodyguard.’

Macharius was famous for wanting to be where the action was, but I wondered that he had really gotten so close to the heretics that they had a chance to attack him personally.

‘He is well then, sir?’ Anton asked tentatively.

‘As well as a man with several bits of shrapnel and numerous heretic bullets embedded in his body can be expected to be, Private Antoniev,’ said the moustache.

‘He is not well then, sir?’ Anton said, not knowing when to leave well enough alone.

‘I have been assured by the Master Surgeon that he will make a full

recovery. It takes more than a few wounds to put down a campaigner like the Lord High Commander. He's had worse in the past and I dare say he will have worse in the future. I should know. I've taken a few such scratches myself in my time.'

'Why are you telling us this, sir?' I asked.

'Because the surviving crew of the *Indomitable* has been assigned to guard the Lord High Commander personally. You are to be quartered within the Hospice of St Oberon forthwith and report for guard duty on the Lord High Commander's ward immediately. Any further questions?' His manner told us there had better not be.

'Why us, sir?' Anton asked. The captain sighed in a long-suffering manner.

'The Lord High Commander personally decorated you. You are known to him. You have won great honour for the regiment and I *know* you will not let us down now.'

'It will be an honour to defend the general, sir,' said Anton. He sounded like he meant it.

'And one well-deserved,' said the captain. 'You distinguished yourself in the taking of this city, and I am sure you will distinguish yourself again, if you are called upon to protect the Lord High Commander.'

'We'll do our best,' said Anton. He actually looked pleased at the prospect of laying down his life to defend Macharius. I think in the back of his mind, he was already picturing a heroic last stand. For myself, I decided that it would not be a bad thing to be safe in the hospital away from pyromaniac priests and their suicidal disciples. The next time there might be no Death Spectres to save us.

'Very good,' said the captain. 'Very good indeed. Mind your manners and don't do anything to embarrass the regiment and you'll find me very grateful.'

For myself I had very little doubt that he would forget about us as soon as we were out of his sight. Still, it was going to be nice, safe cushy billet, I thought. Little did I know.

We went to collect our gear. At least we knew how to find our way to the hospice.

'There are worse places in this world,' murmured Anton as we walked

through the corridors of the hospice. He was right too.

We were on the upper levels of the building, where the very rich and very noble of the city would normally have been treated. The entire level had been cleared and given over to Macharius. Medical adepts came and went. High-ranking officers waited around and discussed strategy. Couriers and orderlies raced along the sumptuously carpeted corridors, trying to be both quiet and quick at the same time. We had just been given time to move into small private rooms on the lower floor before being sent up to start our duties.

We took up a position at the entrance to the ward, relieving some of the troops from Macharius's own personal guard. They were easy to spot because of the lion-head pattern on their uniforms.

We checked the perimeter rooms of the ward ourselves and found only chirurgeons and nursing staff, all of whom had been cleared to be there. We did not get close to the sealed chamber in which Macharius lay. Tall, silent warriors of his personal guard watched us with cold eyes. They held their weapons at the ready. They were taking no chances.

I began to understand why we had been sent for. It would not do for just Macharius's own regiment to be given the honour of guarding him. Every component of the army had to share in that honour. It would have been bad for morale otherwise.

The Understudy had given us a detailed briefing on our way over. Only authorised personnel were to be allowed past and they had to both show us their clearance documents and know the password which changed with every watch. If they did not we were to hold them. If they resisted we were to shoot them even if they had a general's epaulettes.

The duty itself was eight hours of pure tedium. We stood there, weapons at the ready, and we checked papers. Every half-hour the Understudy returned to check on us. He moved from guard post to guard post on a constant loop. He seemed neither bored nor overwhelmed with interest. He performed his duties like an automaton. He could have been a machine animated by the ancient technical magic of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

When the corridors were clear and no one was in sight we chatted, as soldiers will under such circumstances wherever they are in the galaxy. We talked about women, and the places we had been and the people we had known. We kept our voices pitched low and we kept scanning the corridors

as if we expected a horde of heretics to arrive at any moment. I was wondering if we would run into Anna or any of her friends.

‘Who would have thought we would end up here?’ Anton asked. ‘It’s like being at the centre of the world.’

He was excited. We had challenged generals. So far they had all had the proper documents and spoken the proper passwords. We had not been given the chance to shoot any of them for resisting arrest. It was probably just as well since that would likely have ended badly for us.

It was strange. The corridor was hushed and the rooms around us were quiet. Quieter than any place I had ever been. You could not tell that beyond the walls was the thunderous din of a hive city. The sound-proofing was that good. I realised that quiet was a luxury that the rich enjoyed. It did not thrill me too much. I missed the reassuring beat of the hive’s industrial heart. I wondered how the wounded Macharius felt about such things.

Our duties done, we returned to our rooms. The locals looked at us oddly as we made our way there. It felt as if everyone was simply waiting for something to happen. Everyone looked pale and tense as if they knew something we did not, were listening to some secret whispering voice that talked only to them and not to us. I told myself it was my imagination, that all I needed was some rest.

I stared out the armoured glass windows. The streets were unnaturally quiet. The crowds of waiting soldiers had gone now that it was certain that Macharius would live. They had other duties to perform than waiting in the plaza.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Something woke me. It seemed my head had barely hit the pillow and I had fallen into nightmares about flame-headed priests putting me in a cage. I looked at my chronometer. It was late in the night cycle for the hive. The external lights were dim. I pulled the curtains open. My shadow danced in the flickering illumination from the surrounding gas-lit buildings. There seemed to be a huge crowd gathered in the street below. I could see flickering lights down there too, as if naked flames were burning. I was still groggy from sleep when I noticed a banging on the door. Some instinct made me uneasy. I snatched up my shotgun before I opened the door. Anton stood there, his face was pale. Ivan was behind him, dressed and armed.

‘What is it?’ I said.

‘The heretics are attacking.’

‘What?’ I repeated. ‘Attacking? Where?’

‘Everywhere. They are attacking Irongrad. A massive army dropped from orbit and relieved Pentegrad and it’s moving north from there. It’s smashed through Battlegroup Sejanus. More are dropping from space; they’re coming in from Karsk III and the asteroid fortresses. The city has risen against us. Bloody traitors.’

‘The whole city?’

‘Enough. The priests have got them all whipped up against us. The local nobs have decided to side with their old masters. They think they can beat us.’

‘Maybe they can,’ I said.

‘They’ll never beat the Imperium,’ Anton said.

‘That won’t matter to us if they kill us now.’

‘Point taken,’ Anton said.

‘Where did you hear all this?’

‘Couldn’t sleep so I went to have a smoke. Heard the comm boys gabbling.’

Ivan reached for his bottle, took a swig then picked up his lasgun from where it leaned against the wall. ‘It sounds like we’re going to be busy.’

I dressed and grabbed my gear. I heard booted feet running in the corridors. Everybody except us seemed in a hurry to get somewhere. I knew that soon enough someone would come along and let us know what to do.

As if summoned by the thought, the Understudy poked his head round the door. Corporal Hesse was with him. ‘Assemble, lads,’ the Understudy said. His face looked pallid but that might just have been the light. His voice was the same rasping monotone as always. ‘It looks like we’ve got some work to do. Looks like the priests have whipped up a mob and they are coming to get Macharius.’

He might have been telling us he had just gone for a short walk to buy a protein sandwich for all the emotion he showed. I took another look out the window and suddenly everything snapped into place. Massive crowds surged ever closer to the hospice. Priests with halos of flame clung to the sides of massive demolition vehicles and shouted encouragement to the vast surging crowd. It was like looking out at a sea of hate-filled flesh: of very foolish, hate-filled flesh.

The Exterminator variant Leman Russ and the Manticores stationed around the building opened fire. There was no way they could miss. Explosive shells tore into the crowd. Autocannon fire scythed through flesh. Thousands died in seconds. The rest screamed and tried to run but it did them no good. At first the people behind them had no idea what was happening and kept pushing forwards. You could see them knocking down those who tried to retreat and trampling over them, and then in turn come face to face with the reality of intensive weapons fire.

‘This is mad,’ the New Boy said.

I looked at the slaughter and thought about what was going on. It came to me what was happening. ‘Not if you don’t care how many civilians die.’

‘You are a hateful man, Leo,’ said the New Boy. He sounded almost as if he admired me for it.

‘It’s not me. It’s the priests of the Angel of Fire.’

‘I don’t follow.’ The rest of them were looking at me now except the Understudy. All of them looked interested in what I had to say.

‘They want this massacre to happen. It will whip up the population against us. We fired on unarmed civilians. We massacred the locals.’

‘It’s them that’s leading the locals on,’ said Anton. He sounded outraged.

‘I suspect they will forget to mention that.’

‘It makes sense,’ said Corporal Hesse. He was half-looking at me and half-looking at the crowd that were being mown down by our superior firepower.

‘The priests don’t care how many of the hivers we slaughter. We waste our ammunition. We make new enemies. We reveal how strong we are.’

‘It’s a distraction too,’ said the New Boy as if he had suddenly seen the light. ‘While these people tie us down their armies are getting closer.’

‘It seems they’ve learned a lesson or two from Macharius.’

We looked at each other. Macharius was here. In the hospice. Surely the priests must know that. This could be a distraction of another sort. A massive frontal assault while inside...

The Understudy realised it at the same time as I did. ‘Let’s go,’ he said. ‘We’ve got to get to the Lord High Commander – fast!’

Our floor of the hospice looked normal. Medical adepts and Sisters Hospitaller and soldiers in the uniform of the Guard were everywhere. Temporary field hospitals had been set up and the wounded were being treated. The Understudy ordered a passing sergeant to take his report to whoever was in command. He did not slow down on his way to the elevator though. We clambered into the pneumatic tube and headed up. It stopped on the nineteenth floor as if some sort of command override had been given.

‘All out,’ the Understudy said. He was frowning. It might have been a simple malfunction. Such things were common enough but under the circumstances, it was suspicious. We raced along the corridor, heading for the emergency stairs. There were guards there but I did not recognise any of them. Some of them had spots on their uniform, as if they had been splattered with dark, red liquid.

‘Password,’ one of them demanded. He had a local accent. I raised my shotgun and pointed it at them. They went for their weapons at the same time. I pulled the trigger and then dived to one side moments before a las-bolt flickered over my shoulder. The rest of the squad opened fire and cut the sentries down.

‘Why did you shoot them?’ the New Boy asked.

‘They were not our boys,’ said Corporal Hesse. ‘And look at the bloodstains on their uniforms.’

‘Might have been from old actions. Or maybe Leo put it there with his shotgun.’

‘No time to argue,’ the Understudy said. ‘Up the stairs. If you see anything suspicious shoot first and ask questions later.’

We nodded. There was something strange in the atmosphere. All of us could sense it now. Something had gone very badly wrong.

We rushed up the stairs as fast as we could. A short way up we found out what had happened to the sentries. A group of bodies lay there in their underwear. They had been stabbed. One of them still had a scalpel in his chest. Someone must have put it there after they took away his clothes.

‘Whoever did this was probably garbed as a medical adept,’ Corporal Hesse said.

‘Must have been damn good with a scalpel,’ said Anton.

‘Make sure you don’t give them a chance to operate on you,’ said Hesse.

‘Do my best,’ said Anton.

We hit the head of the stairs expecting the worst and we found it. Gunfire echoed down the corridors. It hit me that if this had happened a few hours later, it might have been Anton, Ivan or myself lying cold down there with a scalpel through the heart. The thought did not make me feel charitable towards whoever had done it.

Another idea sidled into my brain. This was a well-planned attack. We were a small group of men. We were most likely outnumbered and we might not be getting out of this alive. Even if we did, there was a city out there full of people who hated us and about to be invaded by an enemy army. I pushed the thought to one side.

‘One problem at a time,’ I muttered.

‘Look sharp,’ the Understudy said. ‘Find Macharius. If they get him, this whole thing is over.’

There were more dead bodies strewn around the corridor. Most of them belonged to our boys. A few belonged to men who looked like medical adepts except for the fact that such people don't usually carry lasguns. Still, it looked like our boys had put up a bit of a fight. A number of the heretics had gone down. The burned meat smell of las-bolt wounds and the scorch-marks on their robes told the tale of how they had died.

'Bastards must have put a regiment in here disguised as medical adepts,' said Ivan said. His frozen metal features gave nothing away but his gaze flickered around the entrances. He was taking no chances.

'What fool ordered Macharius put here anyway?' Anton asked. It's always easy to be wise after the fact. It was about the only time Anton ever managed it.

'There's something odd here,' said the Understudy. I looked at the bodies and I saw that he was right. The dead heretics had all been shot in the back of the head with a very high-calibre slug gun of some sort. They lay sprawled on top of our soldiers.

'It wasn't our boys killed them,' I said. 'Looks more like the sort of thing a commissar would do if they were going to run.'

Ivan frowned. 'What sort of lunatic would pause to execute a half a dozen of his fellow conspirators over the bodies of the men they had just killed? And in the middle of an assassination attempt?'

He was right. It made no sense.

'Maybe somebody on our side took them by surprise,' I said. I had no idea who it could have been though. It certainly wasn't an Imperial Guardsman. Those weren't las-bolt burns. The corpses did not have the exploded-from-the-inside look of bolter victims either so that ruled out Space Marines.

'We don't have time to puzzle this out,' rasped the Understudy. 'We need to move.'

We reached the head of the stairs and moved out into the corridor. The Understudy indicated we should push on. We were close to the ward where Macharius was resting now.

The sounds of fighting got louder. The Understudy looked at me. I knew what he meant. Close order combat is what the shotgun was intended for. I stepped around the corridor, saw a group of men in hospital uniforms carrying guns. None of them looked friendly so I opened fire, pumping shot after shot into my targets. As soon as they heard the thunder of the shotgun

in the constricted space, the others stepped up. Las-bolts flickered past me, eerily silent by contrast to my weapon, except when their bolts sizzled into flesh.

The attack might have been well planned but the execution was sloppy. There was no one guarding the rear or keeping look out. Or maybe whoever had killed those heretics had removed it for us.

It seemed the fanatics were keen to take Macharius's head. A few of them turned to shoot at us though and for a few moments it was touch and go. There was no cover in the corridor. I just had to stand there and trust to luck. I had the advantage of not being taken by surprise. A searing pain in my right bicep told me it was not enough. I walked forwards. It was crazy, I know, but it meant I was moving and more to the point, I think it scared a few of them, fanatics though they were. The sight of a bloodstained maniac with a combat shotgun coming towards you shooting is rarely a reassuring one.

The air stank of roasting flesh and entrails suddenly released from bodies. Piss and excrement gave their usual testimony to the effects of terror. Plants and statues caught fire. Smoke billowed and then as suddenly as it started, it was over. The enemy were all down. In the distance, along the corridor from a different part of the ward, I could hear the sounds of combat. Some sort of slug gun was being fired. After every shot there was a scream.

I looked down. There were more bodies and not just of heretics. They wore the uniforms of Macharius's personal guard, complete with lion's-head insignia. They looked like they had died hard, but they were still dead.

The Understudy walked by me, stiff-legged as an automaton. 'Lord High Commander Macharius,' he shouted. 'Are you in there?'

'Is that you, Ryker?' came back a familiar resonant voice. Somehow, Macharius had remembered the sound of the Understudy's voice. Obviously he was not one of those generals who needed an aide to remind him of the names of those he had met.

'Yes, sir. We've cleared the corridor. We need to get you out of here.'

'Come in with your hands up. Bring a few of the lads from your unit with you, if they are there.'

He was cautious, give him that. I don't know how he expected the heretics to impersonate the Understudy but he must have seen some odd things in his time. The Understudy nodded to me and we stepped through the door.

For show I held my shotgun at arm's length above my head. I did not want any mistakes made as to my intentions.

Macharius was in there, crouched down behind the bed he had been using for cover, an antique bolt pistol in his hand. He looked pale and his upper torso and head were wrapped in bandages. More of his guard were sprawled on the ground near him. They had died to the last man to protect him. Macharius himself grinned at us. There was a glitter in his eyes that was close to madness. I realised then why it was the Lord High Commander led assaults and how he had collected his wounds. He enjoyed combat, loved it with a burning passion. Some men do. He was one of them. The bolt pistol he pointed at us never wavered. I sensed without needing to be told he would be happy to use it if given any provocation at all.

As ever the Understudy gave no sign of fear. I wondered what it was he had seen when he was splattered with brains back in the Baneblade. 'We need to get you away from here, sir. The heretics have taken the entire upper floor and they're on their way now. The hive may fall any time soon.' Macharius nodded, as unabashed by the situation as the Understudy.

'Right,' he said. 'Let's go.'

Just like that he took control of the situation. Newly risen from a hospital bed, drugged with painkillers, attacked by surprise in what was supposed to be a secure zone, he was ready to lead. It was strangely reassuring to have him there even though he was now the most wanted man on the planet.

The sound of shooting stopped. It was all eerily quiet as we walked out into the corridor ahead of Macharius. The door at the far end slid open and we turned to face whatever new threat it represented.

Much to my surprise, it was Anna. Her nurse's uniform was covered in blood. She was holding a very large gun in her hand and showing no signs of strain. Her face was cold and calm. The weapon pointed directly at us. She looked as if she knew how to use it. She was looking directly at me. I think the fact she recognised me was all that saved us. Looking back now, I am certain of it. She was quite capable of killing all of us before we could react. The Understudy was already blocking Macharius from exiting the room. 'The flesh of heroes is the bulwark of the Imperium,' she said.

'Don't shoot,' said Macharius. 'She's one of Drake's. She knows the passwords.'

She walked towards us. She gave no sign of recognising any of us. She did not look like anyone I knew. Her eyes were cold as the vacuum of the void.

‘Bloody hell,’ said Anton. ‘Is that–’

‘Yes.’ I cut him off before he could say any more. I tried to remember what I had said when I was drunk. If she was an Imperial agent then I was in deep, deep trouble. I shrugged. I was one of a small handful of Imperial Guard survivors standing in a building being overrun by heretics. I was already in trouble. Being reported to the Imperial authorities seemed the least of my problems.

Macharius stopped for a moment to look out the stained armour-glass of the window. If he was daunted by the sight of the heretic hordes pouring into the plaza he gave no sign of it. He glanced at the emergency escape diagram on the walls beside the stairs. He seemed to memorise it in a glance then he turned to Anna and said, ‘You know your way around this place.’ It was not a question.

‘Yes, sir,’ she said.

‘Get us out by the fastest and most secure route.’

Whatever Anna was, Macharius seemed in no doubt that she would obey him.

Anna took us down the nearest fire escape. There were heretic guards at the bottom. Their backs were to us. Ivan pulled out his knife. He wanted revenge for what their fellows had done to our boys with the scalpels. He needn’t have bothered. Anna raised that long-barrelled gun of hers. There was a faint hissing sound, like a blow gun being used. Heads exploded in quick succession. A few of the heretics managed to turn, confused by the swift savage assault. All that got them was a bullet through the eye or forehead instead. The only accuracy I have ever seen to match it was from the Space Marines. Surely, I thought, she was not…

I let it slide. I had no idea what she was then and truth to tell I did not really want to know any more. All I knew was she was terrifying. It was as if something else had taken possession of the woman I thought I had known, if ever so briefly.

Macharius looked at the carnage.

‘Scout ahead,’ he said as she coldly inspected the corpses. ‘We’ll follow. Clear away any obstacles.’

Swiftly and silently she loped away as if walking into a hornet’s nest of

heretics was no more than a feast-day stroll.

Macharius looked at the bodies. He stripped a corpse and put the chirurgeon's gown over his jacket. 'Take some of the heretics' medical robes and put them on,' he said. 'No sense making your men targets,' he said.

The Understudy rasped, 'You heard the Lord High Commander, lads,' he said.

'No ranks, no insignia, no titles,' Macharius said. He did not need to tell us why. All of those would identify him and the Understudy as the officers and make them targets. I don't doubt that the enemy could have identified him anyway. He had the look of eagles, had Macharius.

Moments later, we were on our way, looking for an exit. Macharius bent over and picked up a comm-vocoder from one of the heretics. He listened to it for a moment to see if he could pick up any chatter and then we moved on as fast as our feet would carry us.

We dragged the bodies out of sight and moved down into the lower levels of the hospice. Ahead of us were more dead bodies all with the same head wounds. They just lay there, sprawled in death. There was no sign of Anna. I had stopped fearing that we would find her corpse among the enemy. The scale of the devastation she wrought seemed almost supernatural.

She waited for us at the foot of the stairs, looking relaxed and unafraid. There were no bodies but I knew from the way she held that odd-looking gun that there easily could be, if anyone came upon us unannounced. The building shook. The roar of the crowd was audible. I smelled burning flesh and molten metal.

'The heretics are overrunning our forces around the hospital, sir,' she said. 'There is no safety there.'

'How?' Surprise tore the words from Anton's mouth. 'There were tanks out there.'

'Psykers,' said Anna. 'And it looks like traitors from inside the hospice. If we join with them we will be overrun with them.'

Macharius took this with more calmness than I could. 'You know another way out? We need to escape from here and go to ground until we can regroup.'

Anna nodded and led us towards another exit. We emerged into an inferno of heat and noise and violence. The crowd surrounding the building had

turned into a seething sea of flesh. I saw a Leman Russ with oily black smoke billowing from its turret and a flame-headed priest standing on its chassis, howling imprecations at the mob. Even though our regimental uniforms were covered by the heretics' robes, I felt as if the massed crowd of enemies was bound to spot us. I expected them to start shouting and pointing momentarily. I decided if that happened I would not be taken alive. I did not want to end up in one of those cages.

All around us heretics howled for blood. The plaza was packed with a chanting crowd. Priests with halos of fire led them. They screamed and shouted with the best of them. There was an atmosphere of mania; a sinister hysteria that I sensed the priests were feeding on. Everywhere I looked the Angel of Fire stared down. Its gaze was everywhere. It seemed to be watching us specifically.

I smelled burning and heard explosions. Looking up I saw the entire top floor of the hospice was on fire. The crowd groaned ecstatically as if this had some occult religious significance. I caught sight of the expression on Macharius's face. He seemed to be drinking it all in – the shouting crowds, the burning war machines, the fire-winged angels perched on the buildings all around. It was as if he wanted to memorise the entire tableau, as if he wanted to recall every face so he could seek personal vengeance on them all.

'We had best keep moving,' he said. 'This is not the safest place to be.'

We began to shoulder our way through the crowd, which remained blessedly unaware that the man for whose blood they were howling was making his way through their midst.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

‘What now, sir?’ I asked once we had battled our way to the edge of the crowd.

‘We need to find a place to hide until we can find out what is going on and make contact with our own people.’

‘If there are any left,’ said Anna. She did not sound too hopeful on that score.

‘Any suggestions?’ Macharius asked.

She nodded and glanced at her feet. ‘The underhive,’ she said. ‘It’s a lawless place but the priests don’t hold too much sway down there. No one does.’

She sounded as if she had first-hand experience of that. She was right too. When you’re in trouble in a hive city there is only one way to go – down. It is proverbial that everything rolls that way in a hive – poverty, excrement, crime.

‘Lead on,’ said Macharius. He looked drained but there was no strain in his voice.

We made for the nearest ramp and started our trip to the bottom. No one paid too much attention to us. The city was in an uproar. Sensible people were keeping off the streets. The heretics assumed we were with them. We avoided any sounds of fighting.

At first, we went through the prosperous areas with commercia and factorums and reasonably well-maintained hab-blocks. As we kept on with

our downward progress, things started to look a little grimmer. The blocks were not so nicely built; the people were not so well-dressed. More and more trash was piled up against the walls until the heaps of rotting stuff looked like great buttresses. More and more locals stared at us and then walked on. We were wearing blood-stained robes with medical symbols on them. We were carrying weapons. It was no wonder that people stared at us and equally it was no wonder that they left us alone.

Groundcars swept by. On the upper levels they had been well-maintained, some of them had even been luxurious: the vehicles of administrators and well-off merchants and all the vast cloud of hangers-on that surround the nobles of the upper hive. The lower we went, the less luxurious the cars became, the more dented, the less well-maintained. The paintwork was chipped and rusty, the engines squeaked and roared. More and more transit trains passed overhead and gigantic, multi-trailered buses carried the hive dwellers home from their work. It was astonishing in its way. Above us, war had come to the upper levels. Down here life went on as it always did. People had to make a living. They kept their heads down.

I saw more priests than I had seen since we arrived in Irongrad. One or two of those give us strange looks but no one approached us although one or two headed towards the public vox communications systems. Anton wanted to chase them but the Understudy said no. I understood his logic. It would only draw attention to us and we needed to keep moving.

Macharius looked tired and pale. For a man of his age, getting over major surgery, he was incredibly fit. It was a tribute to how well the juvenat treatments had taken but he was still recovering from his wounds. He was not at his full strength. He had come this far on willpower. It was a commodity he possessed in abundance but I wondered how long even his ferocious determination could keep driving his damaged body. He was reeling now and looked like he would have fallen over if the Understudy had not helped steady him.

We found a huge public elevator and we rode it down as far as it would go. One by one the crowd that surrounded us thinned out – leaving through the exits that would take them to whatever hovel they called home. Every time we looked out the scene got dimmer – there were fewer lights on and whatever roads led away from the elevator door looked emptier and emptier. Eventually, a red light flashed and a warning klaxon sounded and

some sort of automated speaking system told us to vacate the elevator. We obeyed and strode out into a dimly lit public thoroughfare. I could almost feel the weight of the hive pressing down upon us. We must have come down several kilometres from where we had been through multiple layers of the hive city.

We were moving for the sake of moving, not because we had any idea of where we wanted to go. I think it was an instinctive urge to find a lair and hole up. I began to study our surroundings ever more carefully. If you grew up in a hive city, like I did, they were the sort to make you wary. Great sparking cables of ripped out wire descended from the ceilings like vines dripping from jungle trees. Stacks of rubbish and rubble piled up against the walls, narrowing the streets into funnelled walkways. Fungus grew around stagnant pools of urine and leaked sewage. Huge rats scuttled from burrow to burrow, their semi-intelligent eyes gleaming as they chittered to each other. Groups of equally hungry and feral-looking youths armed with ill-maintained weapons eyed us warily. I understood why – they were wondering who we were, if our bloodstained medical robes were the insignia of some new gang. I thought it best if they kept wondering. It provided us with some local cover.

Trash fires burned in the gloom. For the first time the metal angels with their fiery wings showed signs of being defaced. What was all the more impressive was that sometimes their gaseous pinions were the only source of illumination in what were increasingly becoming mere tunnels.

And yet if you knew what you were looking for there were the signs of a culture of sorts and even an economy. Vendors sold skewered rat-meat roasted on braziers. Street sellers hawked ammunition and holy symbols. They had spread their wares out on rotting tapestries resting on fallen columns, broken plinths and what looked like looted pews from temples. Their makeshift shops were set up under the arches of overhead viaducts.

We came across a vast bazaar where second-hand clothes were sold alongside all of the necessities of underhive life – synthetic proteins and carbofoods, ammunition, wargear, toys and amulets. Fortune tellers did a thriving business and hooded figures scuttled round the edges. Once I caught sight of a face so disfigured it was difficult to tell whether it had been marred by mutation, radiation burns or some exotic disease. Possibly it was all three.

The most reassuring thing, strange to say, was that there were no priests visible, and mad-eyed preachers ranted all manner of strange and unsettling sermons as the crowd passed by. We had local currency and we bought food and what the seller claimed was purified water. Our money went a lot further down here than it had closer to the surface and I realised how much we off-world invaders had been overcharged compared to the locals.

No one paid any attention to my accent when I spoke. No one seemed too curious as to where we had come from. I realised that if we wanted we could most likely begin new lives down here. Our life expectancy would most likely be greater than if we remained soldiers of the Emperor on the surface.

It's not as hard as you would think finding a place to stay in the underhive. There are plenty of holes in the wall and abandoned hovels that you can take over but there are also plenty of gangs who have an interest – they have territory to defend, tithes to extract and simple bullying fun to be had with their victims.

We found a burned-out shopfront that no one seemed interested in and we made camp there. To tell the truth, it was considerably better than some of the places I have slept while on campaign.

Macharius lay inside, his back against a wall, his weapons close at hand. He did not look well. It seemed as if the strain of fighting his way clear of the hospice and then finding the way down here had taken a greater toll on him than I at first realised.

Anna sat beside him applying chemicals from the medical pack. She did this with all the competence of a real nurse or a medical adept. She even had some sort of sensor-altar which she attached to him and invoked. Macharius lay there watching her. Sometimes he closed his eyes as if asleep. I wondered if he was ever going to open them again.

The Understudy watched her. Corporal Hesse stood by the door and smiled at passers-by in a menacing fashion. Anton and Ivan were with him. The New Boy stood in a darkened corner. Sensibly, he had a lasgun in his hands.

Naturally, the arrival of a group of well-armed men did not go unnoticed by the local youth. A deputation arrived to enquire as to our business and find out how much we were willing to pay for the privilege of their protection.

I stood back in the shadows with my shotgun in my hand and I observed the newcomers. They were typical underhive scum of the sort that were all too familiar on Belial. Of course, here they were dressed differently. On Belial they might have worn long leather trenchcoats and goggle masks. Here they favoured flowing robes and rebreathers all in varying shades of red. Most of them had facial tattoos depicting flames. They had similar tattoos on their arms and shaven heads. Some of them had skeletons in burning cages as well. The basic message seemed to be, as it is on every world, that they were alienated outsiders who were not afraid to die. Which was good, I thought, because I was perfectly prepared to kill them.

'You must pay,' said the tall burly one who was obviously the leader. His shaven head was marked with a flaming skull. It made a nice target for me to point my shotgun at. 'You must pay and you must swear allegiance to the Khan of the Flames. If you do not, you will die.' He slapped the autogun holstered at his side for emphasis.

'That's all very well,' the Understudy said. 'Ask the Khan to come here and we will see if he is worthy of our fealty.'

'You're talking to him,' said the ganger. 'You want to swear or you want to die.'

The Understudy looked at the small troop of tattooed maniacs following the Khan. I could see the calculation he was doing in his head. They outnumbered us but not by much. They were well armed but not as well armed as we were.

'I propose an alternative,' said the Understudy.

'What is that? the Khan asked.

'You can swear allegiance to me and I won't kill you.' The Khan went for his gun. I stepped forwards and pulled the trigger. Where the Khan's head had been was only a bloody stump of neck. Anton and Ivan raised their lasguns and suddenly the Understudy was there with a pistol in one hand and a grenade in the other.

The gangers just looked at us as if not quite understanding what had happened. They were used to bullying tradespeople and other underhive feebs. I don't think they were used to people who were even more ruthless than they were. 'Go away and don't bother us,' the Understudy said. 'And don't come back unless there are more than a hundred of you. I'd like some target practice.'

It was terrifying the way he said it. There was no emotion in it. He was simply stating a fact. It made me shiver and I was not the one he was threatening. The gangers turned on their heels and ran and I can't say I blamed them.

'What to do now?' Corporal Hesse asked in a parody of the Khan's speech style. We stood in a small group by the entrance, watching the street. It was dark save for the light of angels' wings. Small groups of people lurked in the pools of shadow, watching us watching them.

Anton looked pointedly over at where the wounded Macharius lay. 'I think we wait for the man to tell us that.'

'What if he can't?' Hesse asked.

'Then he will,' Anton nodded at the Understudy.

'Chain of command,' said Ivan. 'I am surprised you need us to tell you that.'

'I was more thinking of foraging for food and keeping the priests off our back,' said Hesse. 'And maybe being ready in case some of the local gangers decide to pay us a return visit.'

'We're as ready as we are ever going to be,' I said.

'We need to find out what is going on,' Hesse said. 'How it is going with our lads on the surface. How the war is going.'

'Our lads are most likely being herded into cages and set alight,' said Anton.

'That's going to make things a bit difficult,' said Hesse. He slumped down thoughtfully with his back to the wall and his lasgun in front of him. He looked at us and then the Understudy and Macharius then back at the street. 'It's a pretty small fighting force to take back a world but I suppose it can be done.'

'Your faith is touching,' said a cold voice from near the doorway. All of us went for our weapons. None of us were sure how such a large man could have snuck up on us without us noticing. The figure was tall and lean and his face was covered by a cowl and yet there was something familiar about his manner and those features we could see.

'Put the guns down,' he said. 'You are not going to shoot me.'

Anna had her weapon pointed directly at his head. He made some sort of gesture with his hand and she lowered it slowly. I told myself it was not

some form of psychic control. It was merely an understood signal.

He said it with the same sort of utter certainty that Macharius might have done but there was none of Macharius's warmth in his voice. He pulled down the cowl so we could get a look at his face. All of us recognised his features. We had seen him accompanying Macharius on the very first day of campaign.

'I am High Inquisitor Drake,' he said. I shuddered; back then I had heard only the vaguest of rumours about the Inquisition, the sort of scuttlebutt you picked up from people who knew people who knew people who had heard something once on a campaign three systems away. The Inquisition was feared by men who feared almost nothing else. I was destined to understand why. At the time, I found Drake frightening enough and I did not even know one tenth of the reasons I ought to be afraid.

The Understudy looked up at him. He had not lowered his gun but he did not look like he was planning on using it either.

'How did you find us?' he asked. Drake's fingers stabbed out at Macharius. 'I found the Lord High Commander. He has a most distinctive aura. You should be grateful that none of the Angel's more devout worshippers are as familiar with it as I am.'

'You are a psyker?' Anton asked. He gulped as he said it but the words came out anyway. I could tell the fact that Drake was a psyker scared him in a way that the fact that Drake was an inquisitor never would.

'I am overwhelmed by your powers of deduction,' Drake said. He walked over to where Macharius lay and looked down at him. He glanced at Anna and she nodded to him. Clearly there was some sort of understanding between the two of them. Drake passed a hand through the air over Macharius's recumbent form and nodded, as if satisfied by something that none of the rest of us understood. 'He will recover.'

He said it with utter certainty. It came to me then and there that I disliked the inquisitor and likely always would, even though we were on the same side. Let me rephrase that – my suspicion is that I was on the same side as him. He was on his own side, whatever that was.

'How did you escape?' I asked, just to show I was not afraid, although I was.

'The heretics attacked our quarters. I departed. They did not see me.' He said it as if it was simple. Perhaps for him it was.

‘You left all your people behind?’ The words just came out of my mouth before I could stop them.

‘You are judging me?’ There was a dangerous edge to his voice now. He was not a man used to being questioned. He was a man to be feared. The fact that he had found his way here without aid told me that. I felt like I ought to say something but I could not. Resentment was at war with fear. The cold grey eyes bored into mine. They seemed to look right through me. Perhaps they did. A tiny smile quirked his thin lips as if something he was looking at amused him.

‘I saved those I could,’ he said.

‘Where are they now?’ Anton asked. ‘We could use the reinforcements.’

‘They are where they will be most useful. And if an ill fate befalls us they will be useful to those who come after. There are things on this world that the Imperium must be warned of.’

‘And what would those be?’ The Understudy’s rasping delivery was calmer than mine would have been under the circumstances.

‘This world is steeped in the darkest sort of heresy.’ Anton shot me an I-told-you-so look. ‘The priests of the Angel of Fire are worse than anything you have encountered before, Private Lemuel.’

I did not need to ask how he knew. Doubtless as an inquisitor he would have access to our campaign histories. He saw me staring at him and for once misinterpreted my thoughts.

‘Yes, I know who you are. I looked into the backgrounds of all those assigned to guard Macharius. I know you are loyal and I know you are decorated for bravery.’

It was an alarming thought that we had come to the attention of this cold, vain and supremely powerful man. Having an inquisitor look closely at you was worse even than having a commissar do so. I wondered if he had been in touch with Anna before this. I did not doubt that they would know each other. They were of a kind. I wondered whether she was another inquisitor.

‘You were saying about the priests of the Angel of Fire,’ the Understudy said.

‘I fear their cult is merely concealment for something older and much darker. Their use of unsanctioned psykers tends to confirm that but it is what those psykers are in touch with that troubles me.’

‘And what would that be, my friend?’ Macharius’s rich, powerful voice

carried easily through the chamber. How long had he been awake and listening? It was possible he had been so the whole time. Macharius was a man who liked to seize whatever advantage in whatever situation he found himself.

‘Something daemonic,’ Drake said, without missing a beat. His gaze focused on the Lord High Commander and there was respect there and a challenge, and something else. I am not sure what. He had that look you sometimes see on the faces of the wounded when they are about to experience a religious conversion. Why an inquisitor would look at Macharius that way I do not know. I heard Anton gasp but when I looked at him he seemed secretly pleased. He was caught up in the sort of high drama he had only ever read about. I wished him luck with that. It was the sort of drama I could live without ever seeing.

‘You are certain?’ Macharius asked. His tone was flat and fatal.

Drake nodded. ‘I told you as much when the reports started coming in from my agents.’

‘How bad is it?’ Macharius was not going to give even a high inquisitor a chance to say I told you so.

‘As bad as can be. There are strange currents in the air now and odd and terrible rituals are being performed. Every death those blasphemers have caused contributes to it. Something is feeding on it.’

‘Why?’

‘I think there is something preparing to break through into this plane of existence. I think our presence here has contributed to that.’

‘You are saying that we are somehow the cause of all of this?’

Drake shook his head. ‘I think this was going to happen anyway at some point, our presence merely hastened the event. The heretics need aid against us. They are using supernatural means to acquire it before the full force of the Imperium arrives.’

‘There’s more, isn’t there?’ Macharius said.

‘Our presence has allowed them to move openly, to cloak their evil rites in the mantle of patriotism and resistance to the invaders. The people might have risen against them if they had simply gone about their ritual murders on such a huge scale. Now it is all part of the war effort.’

‘You are saying that the locals are not all heretics then,’ said Anton.

‘They believe in false gods and false prophets but they are not the pawns

of daemonic powers,' said Drake. 'At least, not yet.'

'And we are stuck here in the underhive,' said Macharius.

'For the moment,' said Drake.

'We must come up with a plan,' said Macharius. He slumped back in weariness and stared at the ceiling. He had the abstracted look of a man in deepest contemplation. His body might have been weak but his mind was racing.

'It will need to be a very good one,' said Drake. 'I fear the forces we had left in the hive are totally overrun.'

I thought about that for a long moment. If we were the only loyal Imperial troops left in the city, what chance did we have? And how long would it be before the heretics started looking for Macharius even down here?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

‘Tell me about Belial, Lemuel,’ Macharius said. ‘What is it like?’

I sat beside him. He had beckoned me over. I looked down at the Lord High Commander. He lay on his back. His eyes glittered. The surge of energy he had shown when speaking with Drake had faded. Or maybe he was just saving his strength. With Macharius it was always hard to tell. He had recovered from wounds that would have left me flat on my back for weeks and he seemed to be recovering very well. I wondered what it felt like to him at this moment, to have won so much and to have lost it, to have gone from a palace to this rancid, rotting shell of a store in the underhive. I did not ask him though. Macharius had a reputation for speaking to private soldiers, for wanting to know what his army was thinking, but I was not tempted to any familiarity and I suspected he would not brook it.

‘What would you like to know, sir?’ At the moment, Macharius seemed to want to talk. There was just the two of us in this part of the building. The Understudy was nearby. Drake was by the door working on a datacore slate. His eyes were closed and he appeared to be talking to himself but I suspect it was all a lot more complicated than that. The rest of them had gone out foraging for supplies. Anna sat near him, weapon on her knees, watching the entrance. I doubted anything short of a small army was going to get past her.

‘What was it like? A forge world of some sort?’

‘An industrial world, sir, allied to the Adeptus Mechanicus but not a forge

world. We supplied components. I am not sure what for. The trade routes were disrupted during the Great Schism and trading ships were rare.'

'You worked in a factorum?'

'A guild factorum, sir. It was before I volunteered for the Guard, before we all did, sir. Anton and Ivan and me.'

'Why did you do that? Were you looking for adventure?'

This inquisition was making me uncomfortable. I did not want to tell him we joined up because we had no alternative. It was either that or be tortured to death by local gangers. I just nodded.

'I can understand that,' he said. I sensed that he could too. Sometimes you can tell more about a man by the questions he puts to you and the motives he ascribes to you than he can tell by your answers to his questions.

'Looking for adventure, sir?'

He nodded back. I suspected that he knew what I had been thinking. He was a very good reader of men was Macharius. In his position, you had to be. 'That and other things, Lemuel. I want to serve the Emperor. I want to restore His peace and His Light to our sector of the universe.'

If anyone else had said that to me I would have mocked them. It seemed like a tall order for one man. With Macharius though, it was different. He took it seriously and somehow that made you do so too.

'A worthy goal, sir,' I said.

'The only worthy goal, Lemuel,' he replied. 'The Schism made humanity weak. It opened our territories to invasion by xenos and heretic. It left thousands of our worlds and billions of our people prey to cosmic evil. We can put an end to that. We can make a difference.'

'It seems like a big job, sir.' I said.

'Too big, you are thinking, but it is not, not for the Imperial Guard. It is too big for one man, or one million men, but with the resources of the Imperium to draw upon no task is too large.'

His words were those of the great politician he was but you could tell he believed them. That was what gave them such force. And he spoke with the same passion to an audience of one as to an audience of hundreds of thousands. 'If we don't stand together, we are doomed. I don't care what the Schismatics believe as long as it includes belief in the Emperor, Lemuel, strange as that may sound. What I care about is the way heresy fragments the realm of humanity and tears us apart. United under the rule of the

Emperor we are invincible. Split into thousands of warring schismatic states we will fall. Someone needs to put it all back together.'

'And you think you are that someone, sir?' It was almost disrespectful of me to say it, but Macharius was in a strange mood. He seemed to be talking to himself as much as to me. Perhaps he had been more affected by his wounds and his overthrow than I thought.

'In the absence of anyone better, Lemuel, yes. I am that man.'

And there it was – the iron core of his self-belief, the secret of what made him what he was. Macharius was a believer. He believed in the Emperor, he believed in humanity, but most of all he believed in Macharius. All of his beliefs were in perfect alignment and all of them supported each other. If you opposed the Imperium, you opposed Macharius. If you were the enemy of Macharius, you were the enemy of the Imperium. I was to see evidence of just how ruthless that could make him, before the end.

'I believe you, sir,' I said. And I did. Just like everyone else who ever followed him, except maybe one.

'I have a question for you, sir, if I may ask,' I said. I nodded at Anna. 'That girl, what is she?'

Macharius laughed. 'Not who, what! An interesting question.'

I kept my face blank. I did not want Macharius to know exactly how much of a personal interest I had in Anna and what she might say. Macharius's eyes flickered in the direction of Drake as he considered his reply. 'She is an agent of the Imperium, Lemuel. I would go as far as to say she is a highly trained one, possibly even altered by ancient, arcane science. An assassin.'

'An assassin, sir?'

'The Imperium has other tools than armies, Lemuel, more subtle ones. Sometimes a stiletto is needed instead of a chainsword.'

'Why was she there, sir?'

'I can see you are disturbed by this. She was watching over me.' I thought of the circumstances in which I had met Anna. She was a newcomer at the hospice. She had arrived there a mere day before Macharius himself was flown in. It seemed a little too much to be a coincidence. Macharius watched me closely and for once came to the wrong conclusion. 'She is not someone you have to worry about, Lemuel. She is a loyal servant of the Imperium.'

I suppressed a shudder and wondered what would happen if she decided that I was not. I looked over at Drake and wondered what would happen if she passed on a suspicion of that to him. I made myself shrug, for one brief instant forgetting that Macharius was watching me. He laughed. ‘That’s the spirit, Lemuel.’

He closed his eyes and returned to sleep. I noticed that his gun was in his hand. It would not do to wake him suddenly I thought, so I moved quietly away.

I walked over to Anna. She stood in the shadows now, leaning against the wall with its peeling plasterwork, studying Macharius and the room and our surroundings without seeming to. She looked completely relaxed but I knew that any moment she could erupt into violent action. Approaching her was like approaching a great predatory beast.

She watched me without seeming to and as I approached, I knew she was as aware of my presence as I was of hers.

‘Private Lemuel,’ she said as I reached her. I was almost close enough to reach out and touch her. Her voice was pitched low. It might have been not to disturb Macharius. It might have been so she could not be overheard.

‘Anna?’ I said. I kept my voice just as soft. ‘Is that your name?’

‘It will do, for now,’ she said. I looked at her with a mixture of fear, embarrassment and something I could not quite put my finger on. Attraction, maybe? She looked back at me as if I were a complete stranger.

‘I must say I was surprised to see you,’ I said. Idiotic, I know, but you try making conversation with a stone-cold covert killer that you just happen to have slept with and who knows enough to have you executed at whim.

‘I wasn’t surprised to see you. I knew you were on the detachment guarding Macharius. I approved it.’

‘You approved it?’ I was confused but a little reassured.

‘I transferred into the hospice when it became obvious that Macharius was going to be sent there.’

I thought about that. The timing was certainly right. We had met the night before we had found out Macharius was wounded.

‘If I had arrived sooner some of this unpleasantness could have been avoided. As it was, I was just in time to forestall the Lord High Commander’s assassination. You and your comrades helped. You have my

thanks.’

I wondered if she was joking. She did not seem to be. There was no trace of the girl I thought I knew in her face. She was gone, as if she had only been a mask of flesh and just as easily removed.

‘You saved us as well.’

‘It was incidental to saving the Lord High Commander but you’re welcome.’

I smiled at her. She was letting me know exactly how little the rest of us meant to her in no uncertain terms.

‘All of the other stuff, what happened between us, that was just part of your cover story wasn’t it, part of fitting in with the girls and avoiding suspicion? That’s why you defended the Angel so strongly.’

‘Exactly so. You are a perceptive man, Private Lemuel.’

‘I said some things…’

‘Yes. You did.’

‘Are they…’

I didn’t know exactly what I was going to say but she finished the sentence for me. ‘…on your file?’

I looked around to make sure no one else was listening to us. Drake seemed wrapped up in his note-making. Macharius was asleep. I nodded.

‘Not yet,’ she said. ‘They may never be.’

She left that hanging in the air. It seemed she had a lever to use on me if she wanted. I wondered why she would need one of those. I did not then understand the truly devious world in which she lived and operated. Perhaps I do not now.

‘I see,’ I said. I turned to stalk away, hoping I looked more disgusted than afraid.

‘Leo?’

I turned and looked at her over my shoulder. She smiled and looked a little like I remembered her from before. ‘It was fun.’

I shook my head and kept walking. I was wondering whether she meant the night we had spent together or what she had just done to me.

‘We need to find out what is going on,’ Macharius said. He looked more energetic now after a cycle of rest. We were all back in the shop-front, listening attentively. ‘We need supplies and we need to make contact with

our own people if there are any left alive.’

He looked at us. His leonine gaze moved from face to face as if seeking dissent. No one disagreed with him. No one had thought of deserting either. Where would we go?

In the few hours since he had returned to his senses he had taken charge completely. We were like small asteroids who had fallen into the gravity well of a gas giant and become temporary moons. Only the Understudy seemed completely unaffected but then he was not affected by anything much any more.

‘If we head up, the heretics will most likely spot us. They will be looking for you in particular, if they realise they do not have your body.’ Drake was the only one of us who felt capable of speaking out against Macharius. The rest of us would probably have followed him if he had ordered us to charge the Cathedral of the Angel of Fire single-handed. ‘All we need to do is remain hidden until General Sejanus arrives and takes back the city. We can contact our forces then.’

‘You have agents here,’ Macharius shot back. ‘You spent the first few weeks putting them in place and putting pressure on the locals.’

‘Our own people will be reliable if they are not caught,’ said Drake. ‘I doubt the locals will be of any use. They were with us because they thought we were winning or because we could put pressure on them. We don’t have a lot of leverage on them now.’

‘You can contact your people by the usual means?’ Macharius’s tone let us all know he was talking about using psyker powers.

‘It might not be wise. The heretics employ many of the unsanctioned. They might be able to detect me.’

‘Might. Might. Might. It seems to me that you spend an awful lot of time telling me what cannot be done, high inquisitor, and not very much telling me what can be.’ Drake shot him a cold glare. He was not used to being talked to in that tone. He was used to being feared. Macharius matched his stare easily. He might only be in charge of an army of less than a dozen but he was still every inch the Imperial field commander. It was perfectly possible that Drake had the power to kill us all without any effort but Macharius gave no hint that he took such a thing into consideration. In the battle of wills between general and inquisitor, it was the inquisitor that looked away first.

‘I will do what I can,’ he said.

‘Good,’ said Macharius and grinned. ‘The rest of you gather supplies and get ammunition. We’ll need all we can get. Try not to draw too much attention to yourselves while you are doing it.’

His manner was cheerful and in control. You would never have guessed that we were alone in a city full of potent enemies. He never doubted for a moment that he was going to find some way to turn the situation into a victory. At that moment, I began to suspect that Macharius was not quite sane as most of us measure sanity.

Sane or not though, he was a great man.

‘We’ve been in worse situations,’ Anton said. We sat in a bar in underhive Sector 13 and no one paid too much attention to us. We were just two more armed men in blood-stained coveralls. The medical robes had become progressively more grubby as we hauled stuff back to our new base. Our faces were smudged and we had a few days’ growth of stubble. He took a sip of the distilled alcohol and winced. It must have been bad to make Anton do that. We were talking in Belial street dialect and that got no attention either. No one around here seemed too bothered by strangers’ talk. In hive cities there are all manner of technical dialects spoken by various castes and guilds. Sometimes people raised a couple of kilometres from one and another cannot understand what the other is saying. ‘Care to name some,’ I said. I was feeling gloomy. There was a strange pressure in the air, a feeling of expectancy and something else. I think we all felt it and we had no idea what it was. It was something other than the despair of defeat though. It was as if an invisible psychic miasma was drifting down from the upper levels of the hive and polluting our souls.

Ivan let out a low whistle. The flickering gas-lights reflected in his metal cheeks. I wondered if anyone might have recognised him because of those. I doubted it. The city was too big and the people too many and anyway, what were we going to do about it?

‘The idiot boy is right,’ Ivan said. ‘We’ve got money, food, ammo and most of the time no one is shooting at us. It could be worse.’

‘Thanks,’ Anton said, ‘I think.’

I glanced around the bar. It was a small place with half a dozen seats, just some shelves propped up against the hive wall, a few planks set on top of

some empty barrels and some old stools set in front of it. We had a clear view of the street. The barman was a huge, burly man with doughy skin and an interesting wart the size of my fist on the side of his neck. Such stigmata were not uncommon in the underhive.

‘We could set up a gang down here,’ said Anton, the alcohol warming him to the topic. ‘We could rule these streets.’

‘We’ve got Macharius with us and an inquisitor, you think they are going to be happy with us running some street corner extortion racket?’

Ivan said, ‘It won’t be long before Sejanus and the rest of the army get here. All we need to do is wait for that. You heard the inquisitor.’

I was not as sanguine about that as he was. I suspected Sejanus would find Irongrad a lot harder nut to crack this time. I was not exactly sure why yet, but I felt it was going to be so.

‘So what’s going on with your girl, Anna?’ Anton asked. He had been dying to know but had not asked in her hearing. I don’t think he was exactly afraid of her. Just understandably cautious.

‘She’s not my girl. She’s an Imperial Assassin. She’s protecting Macharius.’

‘An Imperial what?’

‘An Assassin, some sort of agent, specially trained and equipped.’

‘She tell you that?’

‘Macharius did. I asked him.’

‘You what?’

‘I asked him. I was going to ask him about making you a Space Marine but you all came back in and interrupted.’ This was not something I really wanted to talk about. Ivan at least had sense enough to know that.

‘She’s no worse than the inquisitor,’ Ivan added. ‘He’s doing some scary stuff. Never cared much for psykers.’

‘You going to tell him that?’ I asked.

Ivan shrugged. ‘He already knows. Or at least he does if he bothered to read my mind.’

‘Damn! Anton’s the only one who’s safe then.’

‘Why is that?’ Anton asked, obliging as ever.

‘Because you don’t have a mind to read.’

‘Ha bloody ha.’

‘We could just not go back,’ I said. I was floating an idea that I knew had

passed through all our minds.

‘And do what?’ Ivan asked. He looked at me sidelong. It’s surprising how judgemental his immobile metal features can look in the right light.

‘What Anton says, start up our own gang or join one of the locals.’

‘Keep dreaming,’ Anton said. ‘Three men are not a gang and you think any of the locals will take strangers? Nah – I think I am going to stick with Macharius. I am curious as to what he will do next.’

‘We took an oath,’ said Ivan. ‘When we joined the regiment.’

‘I guess I’ll stick with you then,’ I said. ‘Someone needs to keep you out of trouble.’

‘Let us know when you find him then,’ said Anton. He took another drink.

Drake did not look pleased when we returned. He looked tired and coldly angry.

He sat opposite Macharius and was in the midst of arguing about something when we walked in. They both looked up and fell silent.

Drake suddenly stiffened and stood up. He swayed. His brow went tight and his face went suddenly pale. He forced his eyes shut. Red teardrops dripped from them and ran down his cheeks before speckling the rockcrete floor beneath him. He ground his teeth and muttered and clutched at his forehead. I wondered if he was having a stroke. Anna walked over to stand beside him. She looked as if she was ready to catch him if he fell over.

Suddenly he slumped down onto the floor and glared around fiercely. His eyes were bloodshot. He raised his hand and touched his cheek and then inspected his bloodstained fingertips.

‘What is it?’ Macharius said.

‘I have had a vision,’ said Drake. ‘The Emperor has granted me a gift of the sight.’

‘Tell me,’ Macharius said.

Drake’s eyes narrowed. A small frown crinkled his lofty brow. He looked as if he wanted to be sick.

‘Tell me,’ Macharius repeated.

‘They have started burning the prisoners. From among our men. The ones they captured.’ The words hung in the air like a bad smell. It was obvious that this was only part of it. Drake studied the ceiling for a few moments. I followed his gaze. There was some mould there but the pattern was not

interesting enough to justify his concentration.

‘They are burning them in cages,’ he said. The words came out at a steady measured pace like a regiment of troops marching on parade. ‘They are performing a ritual. They are spending lives to work great sorcery.’

‘That does not sound good,’ said Anton. Drake glared at him and then shook his head. Obviously he understood the sort of idiot he was dealing with. He continued talking as if he had not been interrupted.

‘They are summoning something,’ he said. ‘A being of great power and cosmic evil.’

‘The Angel of Fire,’ Anton said.

‘That is one name for it,’ Drake said. ‘It is the entity they have worshipped all these years.’

‘Why now?’ Macharius asked.

‘There is a war on,’ said Drake. ‘They seek to use the power of this daemonic entity to strengthen themselves and smite our righteous armies. If they succeed before General Sejanus lays siege to the city then they will have the power to destroy him.’

I looked at Drake. He seemed deadly serious. I was wondering what could possibly have the power to destroy the sort of force that General Sejanus would bring to Irongrad. I had a suspicion I would not like the answer if I was given it. I glanced at Macharius. He was obviously taking the inquisitor’s words very seriously.

‘What will happen if this being manifests?’ Macharius asked.

‘It will be dreadful. It will bring with it things from the hellish space it inhabits, from the warp.’ He seemed to be forcing the words out, as if he did not really want to speak them. I doubt he would have if Macharius had not been there. The force of the Lord High Commander’s will was great enough to daunt even an inquisitor. ‘It will have vast psychic powers at its command and legions of daemons. If it gains a foothold here nothing short of Exterminatus will remove it. General Sejanus’s force will not be able to stand against it.’

‘We need to stop the summoning then,’ said Macharius. He said it as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. I suppose it was. I could foresee a few problems. The half a dozen or so people we had here had been barely enough to get him out of the hospice. How would we be able to stop the manifestation of some daemon-god? Such trifles did not seem to bother

Macharius. I suppose the difference is what made him what he was and me a common soldier.

‘Very good,’ said Drake. ‘Now all we need to do is work out how.’

‘We need a plan,’ said Macharius. We need several Chapters of Space Marines and a couple of Imperial armies, I thought, but I kept my mouth shut.

‘I believe that is your department,’ said Drake with an impressive amount of controlled sarcasm.

‘Yes,’ said Macharius. ‘And I know what must be done. Can you find the locus of this summoning?’

‘It is centred on the cathedral. If we get close enough I can pinpoint it more precisely. You cannot be thinking to go there…’

‘We are the only ones who know and can do anything. If we don’t, no one else will.’

‘But breaking into the cathedral will be impossible.’

‘Nothing is impossible,’ said Macharius. ‘Bold men can overcome any difficulty if the Emperor is with them and their faith is strong.’

Anna nodded. She quite clearly believed what the Lord High Commander was saying. So did Anton and Ivan and Hesse. The Understudy’s face was blank.

Drake looked at him coolly as if not quite sure what to say. Macharius rattled off orders telling us how to prepare. None of us seemed to know what to say. What he was proposing was quite clearly madness but then so was waiting for a daemon-god to appear. And he was Macharius and our commander. We could not disobey him. I looked around the shabby, half-abandoned shopfront. It suddenly seemed quite home-like, now I knew we were leaving and where we were going.

We left within the hour.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINETEEN

On the upper levels of the hive, the cages were in use. All of those hideous metal artefacts were full and all of them were frying Imperial soldiers like a Belial beer-hall vendor making rat steaks on a feast-day night. Every plaza was full of people watching men burn. The air was full of the smell of charring human flesh and the screams of men dying in agony. A lot of people stared. You'd think they'd get tired of it but they never seemed to. There was a strange festival atmosphere about the whole thing. Over everything hung that ominous sense of presence, of something waiting and watching and feeding.

It had its advantages, of course. No one had paid the slightest attention to us as we moved back into the upper levels of the city. Everyone on the street there was taking part in a screaming, chanting, hysterical victory celebration. The priests of the Angel of Fire were ringmasters of this carnival – shouting out paeans of praise to their master through amplification systems, demonstrating their power by igniting the gas jets of the sacrificial cages with a wave of their hands.

They shimmered with power. There was something terrifying and terrible in the air, a hideous, gloating presence that got fractionally stronger with every heartbeat. It felt as if a monster was coming forwards with a slow inevitable tread. Drake looked nauseous. He dabbed tears of blood from the corners of his eyes. He was far more sensitive to whatever it was than I was. Of us all, only Macharius and the Understudy did not look worried and one

of them was quite mad. Even Anna looked troubled.

Once as we walked through the crowd we heard a scream and saw a burning figure reeling through the crowd towards us. I reached for my shotgun, wondering what was happening, but the blazing figure only ran by us screaming with an odd mixture of agony and ecstasy.

'A martyr to the Angel, a martyr to the Angel,' the crowd chanted.

Some of them reached out to touch him, burning their hands. I tried not to flinch away lest I look suspect. People were starting to spontaneously combust in the street, as if all the hysteria and faith was too much energy to be contained within their frail human forms and needed to be transformed into fire. A madness had taken over the city and sometimes, when I looked into the eyes of the people around me, I saw no more humanity there than in the blood-red orbs of an ork.

It got worse the closer we got to the cathedral. It was the focus of all the madness and badness going on. There were more priests in the open area surrounding it than in all the other sectors of the city put together and there were armed soldiers from the local militias come to gape in awe and show their faith. They stood at the base of the tower looking upwards at the sanctified sky where the Angel stood atop the cathedral. It was like standing at the foot of a burning mountain gazing at the blazing peak. The cathedral towered above us, awesome and gigantic, a massive structure guarded by an army of fire-winged metal angels. A web of piping clutched its sides like metal ivy.

No one paid us any attention. They did not feel threatened. They thought they had already won.

Macharius looked interested in everything around him. If the horror had touched him he gave no sign. If he knew the faintest flicker of fear at the prospect of entering the heart of all this evil and confronting its source it did not show. He looked, as always, at ease and utterly in control of himself and the situation. There was no sign of the wounds that had slowed him just a few days ago. His health seemed to have been miraculously restored. There are those who would take that as a sign he was blessed but a medical adept told me that some people simply take very well to the juvenat treatments and that the cellular stimulation helps them regenerate wounded tissue. He thought it most likely Macharius was one of those. Of course, who is to say it was not both? Why should Macharius out of all those millions treated

have been so blessed? Sometimes miracles are subtle instead of overwhelming. Or so the Testaments tell us.

Drake looked physically ill, as if the manifestation of whatever evil was here was crushing his spirit and his internal organs. I could almost feel sorry for him. He, better than any of us, knew what was going on. Given his training and his background this place must have been anathema to him.

Anna looked calm but her face had a frozen look as if she was keeping the expression on her face by an effort of will. It made her features seem mask-like to me although that might just have been my imagination and what I knew of her.

Anton looked pale and scared. At long last he was on the sort of big adventure he had always dreamed of being part of. I don't think it had turned out to be quite what he had expected.

Ivan loomed large in the gloom. His metal features showed no emotion but his eyes were feverish and he fidgeted and whistled loudly, always a sign he was nervous.

Corporal Hesse was sweating and he had bags under his eyes. He smiled nervously and studied our surroundings closely but gave no other signs of fear.

The New Boy, oddly enough, looked fascinated. I suppose he had passed through that stage of being afraid to acceptance of the inevitable. Or maybe he was just a better actor than the rest of us.

The Understudy looked stone-faced as he had from the day the lieutenant was killed. He was not frightened. He was not looking too human either. I wondered what was going to happen to him if his humanity ever returned. There did not seem much prospect of him living long enough for that to happen but I was curious nonetheless. As it was, in his inhumanity, he did not look out of place amidst these revels. There were plenty of people around us who looked crazier than he did.

One thing Drake had made clear – we needed to make this attempt. If the Sons of the Flame succeeded in what they were doing not only were our lives forfeit but also our souls. This ritual was going to birth something dark and strange and terrible and it would devour this world and all the worlds around it, until the overwhelming might of the Imperium arrived to confront it. The chances of us being around to see that were infinitesimal.

Macharius gestured for us to proceed. We shouldered our way through the

crowded ferrocrete plain around the cathedral, making for the entrance. Its shadow fell upon us as we neared the huge structure. It felt warm, perhaps from the heat of all those burning wings.

The entrance to the cathedral was an enormous arch twenty times the height of a man. It was flanked by two enormous stone saints carrying bolter and chainsword. Perched over it, as if about to take flight, was another representation of the Angel of Fire. The local sculptors never seemed to tire of those.

No one stopped us from going in. I was astonished. Either the heretics really were confident or there were other safeguards against intrusion. I would not have taken a bet against the latter. Over the years I have developed a healthy distrust of things that seem too easy.

There were armed men wearing the robes of priests inside but they merely blessed us as we passed. They made a strange gesture in the air with their fingers. Their fingertips left a blazing trail in the air, an oddly shaped rune that seemed to leave its mark on your retina long after you had stopped looking at the original. Everyone ahead of us was dropping the bronze local coins into offering slots so we did the same.

Inside was the nave, a long corridor with a ceiling even higher than the entrance arch. Murals painted by an artist of genius covered it. The Angel of Fire led its cohorts against armies of daemons and orks and mutants, slaying them with its sword of flames. Its prophets watched armies of stony-visaged faithful with burning eyes.

From up ahead came a terrible smell of burning flesh mingled with incense. The sound of choirs singing an infernally beautiful hymn filled the air. We walked on. People greeted us and slapped us on the back, celebrating victory, drunk on the strange carnival atmosphere, assuming that we were like them.

For a moment, I felt my view of the world tip towards heresy. There were thousands of people here, and millions outside in the hive and billions scattered across the system, all of whom believed in the absolute truth of the Angel of Fire. I was one of a tiny band of unbelievers. Who was to say that they were wrong and I was right? Who was to judge the truth of the words I had been taught on Belial against the words that were spoken here?

The cathedral was gigantic and awesome, the sense of imminent presence

all but overpowering. It was certainly stronger than anything I had ever encountered in the temples of the Imperium. It was as if some great mystic revelation was about to unfold and all I had to do was surrender to the truth of it and I would become part of something greater than myself.

Perhaps these people were right. Perhaps the Angel of Fire really did stand at the right hand of the Emperor. How was I to tell? I had never been to Blessed Terra or stood before the Emperor's Throne and yet I took the existence of those things for granted, because I had been taught to, because I believed what was written in a book. These people had books too and they told a different and perhaps greater truth...

I felt a pinching grip on my arm and turned to look at Drake. There was a warning glance in his eyes.

'Resist,' he said. Perhaps his words shocked me out of the trance state. Perhaps it was something else entirely. I felt the lure of temptation recede but I was aware of how attractive it was and how easy it would be to succumb. I saw something in Drake's eyes and for a moment I felt something like sympathy for him and I was convinced he felt something like sympathy for me. These were issues he spent his whole life dealing with. He was constantly confronted with challenges to his faith and had to defend it. Did he have his doubts? At that moment I felt certain that he did and that he had to work harder than I to maintain his faith.

I noticed up ahead of us that there was another great arched doorway but this one was barred by lines of armed men who refused all admittance. Instead, lines of people separated to the left and right of the great aisle, passing up stairs and out of sight. Macharius indicated we should go to the right and we joined the crowds going up that way. It seemed better than milling aimlessly in front of the archway until someone became suspicious.

We moved up the steps with the crowd. The stairwell snaked upwards and after what seemed like hours we found ourselves in a huge gallery that looked down into the heart of the cathedral. We gazed out into an immense space. The ceiling was so high above us that it seemed like clouds had formed below us. Perhaps that was only the incense and the smoke of burning flesh from the enormous caged altar. I realised now why the sound of the choir was so loud. It drowned out the sound of the screams of the men being burned alive below me.

People all around watched enthralled as the priests performed their rituals.

In the centre of the cathedral was the most beautiful statue of the Angel of Fire I had yet seen. It was perfect and lifelike in every detail. It seemed as if a steel angel with wings of fire really had incarnated itself before us. It looked as if it was just about to open its blind-seeming eyes and gaze down upon us in judgement. Perhaps it was just the flickering of the flames from the altar but it seemed to tremble with life. As I watched a great crane arm lifted the cage full of smouldering corpses from the altar. A second one swung a new cage full of living men into position. Another cage was rolled into place. The people around me watched enthralled. Clearly a high point of the ritual had been reached.

For a moment, there was silence from the choir and the crowd. You could hear only the panicked screams of the men in the cage and the subdued roar of the flames below them. They were burning with a low intensity now, clearly not at their full ritual strength. On a high lectern a priest of the Sons of the Flame spread his arms wide and began to preach a sermon. He talked about heresy. He talked about atonement. He talked about punishing the invaders who had defiled the sacred soil of Karsk. Then he spoke a word and the choir began to sing again, ancient ritual words invoking the blessing of the Angel, asking mercy for the souls offered up and hope that their impure souls would achieve grace as they fed the Emperor's great servant, the Angel of Fire.

I saw it now in the ancient, beautiful Gothic words of the sacred song. It was an evil parody of the Imperial liturgy. It echoed the words but used them to put a shimmering gloss on this awful sacrifice.

Part of me, the doubting part, whispered that the true Imperial ritual did the same thing, asking men to give up their lives and souls for the Emperor. I quashed it. There is a difference between asking men to act heroically and truly of their own free will and feeding them into a fire in white-hot cages.

I knew looking at the beautiful statue with its beatific face that whatever it represented was nothing holy but something evil and clever which used a shroud of holiness to conceal a corrupt and rotten heart. Below me men burned as flames leapt higher. I thought it could be me down there and realised that we were doing the right thing by opposing the cult even if it cost us our lives. Then it occurred to me that it was most likely going to do just that.

We gaped in horror as more of our comrades were burned. The local people watched agog. I wondered what had made them come. Was it the spectacle? Were they particularly devout? Was this some form of entertainment for them? They did not look any different from the average citizen of Belial and yet here they were, watching people die as if it were entertainment.

I looked from face to face. Some of them wore expressions of awe. One or two of them licked their lips and sweated as if they were taking some sort of pleasure in the brutish spectacle. Most looked a little stunned. I would like to say it was all down to the unholy power of the ritual the Sons of the Flame were enacting but I am sure it was not.

Many of the people looked on, eyes narrowed, features concentrated. They were simply fascinated by the fact of death. For many of them, this was as close as they were ever going to come to it until the day they died. There was an awful mystery here, beyond even that of the rituals of the Angel. I think they were hoping to see something mystical, to get a glimpse of the reality that lies beyond reality, to be witnesses at the moment of transition from life to death, to see something spiritually meaningful.

In this, they were doomed to disappointment. All they saw were men dying. All they heard was a choir drowning out screams. All they smelled was incense and roasting flesh. If there was anything mystical in the air, it was a horror, a sense of something dreadful slowly approaching, a monster lured by the savour of the killing, drawn to the scent of burning meat and departing spirits.

As the ritual ended and the cranes swung the old cage out and a new cage into position, ushers moved us out of the gallery so the next set of spectators could enter and bear witness. It was all well organised, a great machine designed for no good purpose, human sacrifice on an industrial scale.

We shuffled through the exit and back down a set of stairs along with all the believers. I looked at Anton and saw he was as appalled as me. Ivan looked glassy-eyed. Hesse looked almost sick. Anna had the same air of restrained calm she always wore. I was not in a position to see how Drake or the Understudy or Macharius reacted. I wish I had been.

The trudge down the stairwell was long and there was no way of avoiding it and we found ourselves out in a courtyard where vendors sold souvenirs – small metal cages, and bits of burned bone that purported to be from

victims already cleansed. Somehow this was the worst part of it all. People were buying trinkets and souvenirs as if this day was important to them and they wanted to carry away some small thing as a reminder.

It was all I could do to keep from shooting.

We huddled together in the corner of the courtyard. It was not unusual, there were other small groups of pilgrims gathered in a similar manner, praying or discussing what they had witnessed in low, awed voices. All of us looked to Macharius for guidance, even Drake. He looked back at the inquisitor.

'How long?' Macharius asked. 'How long before whatever they are summoning manifests?' His tone was low enough so that it would not carry far.

'I do not know, hours possibly, days at most. I have read about these things but it is the first time I have witnessed a ritual of such potency from so close at hand.'

'And what happens if they succeed?'

'The Angel will manifest, only it will be no Angel and its manifestation will be a dark and unholy thing.'

'How can we stop it?'

'Somewhere in there a psyker of vast power is drawing all the mystical energy from those deaths and weaving it into a lure for a daemon-god. If we could kill the psyker that would do it…' Something about his tone told us that it was not quite so simple as that, if you could call walking through a temple full of fanatics and assassinating a psyker powerful enough to summon a daemon prince simple.

'But…?' Macharius said.

'But if we succeed in slaying him then there will be no one to control all the energy, the ritual will run out of control. At very least it is likely that anyone in the vicinity will be killed. At worst, a hole will be torn in the fabric of reality and hell will crawl through.'

'Hell is crawling through anyway,' said Macharius. 'This way there is at least a chance of stopping it.'

Drake nodded. He was a brave man but something was clearly preying on his mind. 'Also, if we die in there, there is a good chance our souls will be sucked into the hells from which they are summoning the daemon. They

will be devoured and we will be damned for all eternity.’

‘We’ll be damned anyway if we don’t at least try.’

Macharius looked at us. His steely gaze flickered from face to face. ‘We do not have any choice. We must stop this. If we do not our comrades will be destroyed and our armies on this planet overwhelmed. The souls of millions will be lost.’

His voice was quiet enough not be overheard at any distance and yet I heard every word distinctly. He was right, of course. Something had to be done. For a moment I wondered whether I was the man to do it. Briefly I considered the possibility of simply running but under the gaze of Macharius it was no possibility at all. There was nowhere I could flee to anyway. If the Angel of Fire manifested itself, this whole world would be doomed and my soul and most likely my life would be lost.

I saw reflections of my doubts in Anton and Ivan’s eyes. We could wait. Sejanus would get here with the army soon. Surely, the might of that great force would be enough to overcome what was happening here.

‘There is no time for anything else,’ Drake said. He sounded resigned but ready. ‘If it costs our lives, they will be well spent if we can stop the Angel of Fire.’

‘If we die here, we will die as heroes of the Imperium,’ said Macharius. ‘And if we triumph, our names will be remembered for as long as it endures.’

I could see that swayed Anton and Ivan and the New Boy. They were nodding now. I guess they were thinking what I was thinking. Death and damnation lay on all sides. There was no escape from it no matter which way we leapt. Macharius was offering us the possibility of glory.

‘Can you find this psyker?’ Macharius asked Drake. He studied the nearby pilgrims, looking as relaxed as if this were some holiday outing.

‘His presence is hard to ignore. I am surprised you cannot sense him yourself. The aura is that strong.’ Drake pitched his voice low so that only we could hear it.

‘You will need to lead us to him.’

‘He will be guarded,’ Drake said. The discussion was between him and Macharius. The rest of us waited on their words. Drake was the expert. Macharius was our leader.

‘They are overconfident,’ said Macharius. ‘They expect no trouble here.

We can use that to our advantage.’

‘As you say,’ Drake said. Clearly he was not confident. ‘We do not have any allies here.’

‘There are companies of Imperial soldiers down there,’ said Macharius. He indicated somewhere below us. He was thinking about the men we had seen being sent to sacrifice. There were scores of them. He did not seem to have any doubts that we could somehow free them. We stood at the mouth of hell, half a dozen men in the midst of a world full of heretics, and when he told us that we were going to do the impossible, we nodded our heads and thought, yes we can do this.

‘If we can find them,’ said Drake.

‘I know where they are,’ said Anna. ‘I have studied the plans of this place. I can find them and I can free them.’

She nodded to a doorway in the wall. It was marked as forbidden. ‘That doorway leads to a maintenance section. It must lead also to the machinery of sacrifice. The prisoners will be kept there.’ She obviously had a very clear idea of the topography of the cathedral in her head.

‘Open it,’ Macharius said. He did not seem to have any doubts she could. She began to walk over to the doorway as if it was the most natural thing in the world. We followed her. Her hands flickered over the lock and the door was open. She walked through and we followed before anyone had a chance to object. Up ahead I could hear the whine of heavy machinery and the creak of cages on heavy rollers. The air smelled of grease and incense and men cramped together with no latrines. We walked forwards and came out on a ledge in a tunnel. There were the cages full of prisoners. There were robed guards. We were in the secret heart of the cathedral now, where the mechanisms of sacrifice were visible. There were stairs leading up from here that pilgrims would never see. I wondered if Anna knew where they went too.

‘How do we get them free?’ Hesse asked.

‘We’ll need to be fast,’ said Macharius. ‘Overpower those guards. You will take the keys, Lemuel, and open the cages. Get the prisoners out. Tell them to grab what weapons they can and free the others.’

‘Once they are freed, we need to go up,’ Drake said. ‘And keep going up till we find the heart of this evil.’

Macharius nodded and rattled off orders, clearly and calmly, telling every

man exactly what to do, speaking exactly as if we had a chance of pulling off his mad scheme. He did not repeat anything. He spoke as if he had complete confidence in us. He knew we understood and would not let him down. He was right in that too.

We followed him down towards the lines of cages where the prisoners waited. We walked directly towards the guards as if we had every right to be there. One or two of them glanced at us, wondering what was going on, asking themselves if something was wrong, then pushing the thought aside and telling themselves someone else would deal with it. A priest walked over to us and said, ‘You are in the wrong place, pilgrims, be gone or be burned!’

Macharius shot him. All hell broke loose.

I raced forwards, producing my shotgun from beneath my robe. I opened fire at the closest guard and took him down. A moment later I rammed the butt of the shotgun into the face of a second. Bone broke. Blood flowed. I bent down and picked the keys from the guard’s belt. I handed them to the nearest prisoner. ‘Free yourself!’ I told him.

The man just looked at me stunned. Like the guards, he did not quite understand what had happened. ‘Free yourself and free your brothers! Macharius is here!’

It was as if I had spoken a magic word. The hopelessness disappeared from the man’s eyes. His shoulders squared, he began to work the key in the lock and free the others. As one man got free of the chains, I picked up the guard’s weapon and handed it to him. ‘Arm yourself. Arm the others. Take what you can! Kill!’

Along the line others were doing the same. I caught sight of Macharius. He was fighting with a group of guards. In action, he was utterly lethal, a whirlwind of movement, a blur of motion, too fast to be pinned down or targeted. More of our men were breaking free now, attacking the heretics with anything they could pick up: their chains, censers, weapons ripped from the hands of screaming guards. More and more of those to be sacrificed were joining them. A chain reaction rippled through the cathedral as our soldiers broke free, ready to make a desperate last stand. It was hopeless but it was better than being burned alive in those incandescent cages and having your soul devoured by daemons.

Macharius beckoned. I followed. Macharius had his distraction. I was

stunned by his ruthlessness. Having freed the men, he had left them to fight. He was sacrificing their lives so that we had a chance. The horrible thing was that he was right, and what was even more awful was the fact that the death he had granted them was better than the one the prisoners had been going to face.

We raced up the stairs, on our way to meet the psyker at the heart of this wickedness.

I made sure my shotgun was loaded. Below us I heard the sound of conflict.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY

Drake led us up through a maze of corridors, balconies and stairwells. There were no glow-globes, only gas-lamps carved in the shape of the fire-winged angel. The air was dry. It was warm enough to make you sweat and got warmer with every step we took. We came to a junction.

‘Left,’ Drake said. No one asked him how he knew. We just took his instructions.

We heard footfalls on the stairs ahead of us. A squad of guards rushed down to meet us. We opened fire. There were a score of them but they fell in the first burst. One tried to raise a weapon but Drake raised his hand and gestured and the guard suddenly froze, the weapon falling from his nerveless fingers. The veins in his forehead bulged. The tendons in his neck stood out like cables pulled taut. Fear and rage warred in his eyes. He fell clutching his heart and I did not need to be told he was dead.

‘Put on those uniforms,’ he said. We dug around amid the corpses, performing the unsavoury task of finding garments not too burned and blood-spattered. Eventually we looked like a small squad of Temple Guards who had been in the wars

Below us far away came the sounds of battle. The smell of burned flesh reached my nostrils yet again, a reminder of the fate awaiting us all.

Up and up we went following an intricate web of walkways, balconies and bridges woven around the central space of the cathedral. I realised that the whole core of the place was an empty space surrounding a great central

chimney-pipe that rose all the way to its peak and the statue of the Angel.

We circled many times around the central space, crossed a web-work of bridges. Looking down made me dizzy we had climbed so high. Below us the fight rumbled on. At least I think it did. I heard the sound of shots and screams drifting up the central well. The Guard kept going though it seemed like we had been walking for leagues. My breathing got rough. Ten years as part of a tank's crew does not leave you at optimum fitness for climbing artificial mountains.

The sounds of fighting faded. I did not know whether it was because our comrades were overcome or simply a product of distance but I feared the worst. The air became hotter and the oppressive sense of presence became deeper. I felt like I was walking towards something hellish – that is the only word I can think of to describe it. It was like going into the maw of a great beast. Macharius marched steadily on. Drake went with him. I followed. I always followed.

We emerged onto a massive landing. There were many priests there and many guards. There was nothing else for it but to keep walking forwards as if we had every right to be there.

The heretics did not expect intruders – why should they? This was their most sacred temple. We wore the robes of their sect.

I sweated and my hands felt clammy. At any moment I expected us to be denounced and seized and thrown into one of those terrible cages. My flesh crawled at the thought. I had already decided I would turn my shotgun on myself if the worst came to the worst but only after taking down as many of these bastards as I could. We walked into another enclosed space and Drake came to a halt. Instantly we all formed up around him.

I looked about to see if anyone had noticed our small group huddled together. So far no one had. Maybe they thought we were wrapped in some evil prayer. Many of the heretics present seemed to be. Many were on their knees intoning dark hymns of praise.

Drake paused for a moment, grimaced then shrugged. He began to move confidently further into the complex of chambers. We followed him into a large chamber, lined with leather-bound codexes. Through a massive arched window I caught sight of the outside of the city, far below us. I had not realised we had come so far although I should have realised it from the ache in my legs. A priest looked at us and said, 'What are you doing here? What

is your business?’

Macharius raised his pistol and shot him. ‘My business is with your master,’ he said.

Heretics poured into the room. They had the advantage of numbers but we had the advantage of confusion. They did not know what was happening; all they saw were people in their own robes fighting. They had no idea who was responsible for what. ‘They have come to assassinate the master,’ Macharius said in his commanding voice. ‘Quickly, we must protect him.’

We strode forwards deeper into the sanctum. I knew then that my life was all but over. No matter what happened, there was no way out of this place. We were surrounded by our enemies and at some point suspicion would fall on us or someone would work out what was going on. So far, speed and confusion had carried us through but our luck was bound to run out sooner or later.

I noticed every little thing, the faint shimmering halo of light that played around Drake as he used his powers, the smooth interplay of muscles as Macharius moved ahead of me, the strange blankness in the eyes of the Understudy, the way the light gleamed on Ivan’s metal cheekbones. Anna’s eerie, trance-like calm as she fired shot after unerring shot and never missed. Once a heretic got close to her. She killed him with a blow to the windpipe with the side of her hand that was almost too fast for me to see.

I noticed the almost drugged stares of the heretics. They looked like men on the edge of an ecstatic religious trance, who were expecting some great revelation, who might at any moment be transported into the heavens to meet their gods.

Little did they know, I thought. Now I suspect that perhaps they did. There is more than one kind of revelation and certain souls are as drawn to the darkness as to the light.

The sense of power around us was great. The air shimmered with it. It was like in one of those old religious paintings where the primarchs stand by the body of the fallen Emperor. There was the same sense of imminence of the immaterial, of the onrush of the transcendent.

There were bodyguards within the chamber. They knew at once that there was something wrong. I could see just from the way their postures changed that they were immediately on guard. I opened fire with the shotgun. Fast as I was, Macharius was a long way faster. He shot the nearest, clubbed down

a second with the butt of his pistol and blasted a third. With a motion almost too fast to follow he picked up one of the fallen heretic's chainswords and slashed it through the knee of another. He was among them now, moving too fast for the eye to follow, killing everything within reach, almost as deadly as a Space Marine. The rest of us followed in his wake.

We charged deeper and deeper into the sanctum of evil. It was a titanic chamber whose vaulted ceiling rose far above us. Enormous banners fluttered. Gigantic tapestries depicting yet more scenes of angelic triumph dripped from the walls. In the centre of the chamber was a huge altar above which loomed the inevitable metal angel. This one was only twice the size of a man but somehow it seemed larger, more pregnant with life and energy and mystical meaning. This one was somehow different, more life-like. The ominous flicker of its wings hinted at small movements as if it was somehow coming to life. There were fires in its inhuman eye-sockets which seemed to study the room. In the shadow of its wings, standing behind a massive metal lectern a man led the chanting. He was garbed in red, and his head was cowled. A metallic mask glittered from beneath the cowl. It was a perfect replica of the face of every angel I had seen in the city. On his chest was a convoluted holy symbol, the badge of his office. In his hand he held a ceremonial sword which reflected the flames so well it seemed to be afire itself.

Rows and rows of chanting priests, hundreds of them, knelt in the open space around the altar, genuflecting towards their masked leader. My heart sank when I looked upon them for I remembered the havoc that but a single one had wrought on our old company. I paused, fully expecting to be burned alive in a firestorm of evil magic, but the robed mages merely kept intoning ritual words. All of their gazes were focused on the distant figure of the chief cultist. All of their voices echoed one vast evil chant.

All of these psykers were wrapped up in some dreadful ritual, one that was coming close to its conclusion. I followed their gazes towards the centre of the chamber. I knew somehow, without needing to be told, that he was the focus of all this adoration, that all of the wicked power swirling around the room was flowing towards him and that his was the guiding intelligence behind the evil magic being worked here.

Macharius obviously came to the same conclusion at the same time. He raced forwards like a champion running towards a confrontation with his

ultimate foe. Drake followed him. Anna went with them, her movements a fluent dance. She shot and kicked and chopped with her bare hands and every movement was deadly. Wherever she went, men died.

Voices shouted warnings. The heretics still did not quite understand what was going on. It was the only advantage that we had but we took all we could get from it. Macharius fought like one of the Emperor's chosen. Everything that got in his way, he killed, using the chainsword with the ferocity of a daemon and the skill of a master swordsman. His pistol spoke again and again and every time it shot, a heretic went to join the damned souls in the warp.

Drake was almost as effective. From his hands, deadly blasts of cold blue light emerged. The heretics screamed and fell over dead with no mark upon them. I found that even more frightening than the spells of the psykers. The rest of us blasted, stabbed and shot our way through the enemy ranks by whatever means we could.

I put my shotgun to the head of the nearest pyromancer and pulled the trigger. His head exploded in a waterfall of brains and blood. It splattered the psyker beside him. I would have thought that would have got their attention but the chanting never even slowed down. They paid no attention to me. They just kept right on with their ritual. Behind me, I heard weapons go off and grenades explode and I realised the others were doing the same as I was. Perhaps it was not very chivalrous to kill those helpless men but they were involved in the work of daemons and I felt like we were doing the world a favour by ridding it of them.

As more grenades exploded and more psykers died, a few of them emerged from their trance. When I looked into their eyes all I saw was flames. I knew things were going to get bad then but I did not care. I was wrapped up in killing, filled with a wild, mad rage and a lust to slaughter that was every bit as daemonic as the one that possessed these evil magicians.

I shot and smashed heads with the butt of my shotgun. I kicked as well. I looked around and saw Macharius approach the High Priest of the Angel of Fire. He chopped at the man, who was clearly reeling, and not from the blow that the general had launched but from the backlash of his disrupted spell. Macharius slashed again with the chainsword. The pyromancer parried with his holy symbol and lost the head of it. He chopped back with

his own weapon, knocking the pistol from the general's hands.

Drake extended his own arms and gestured and the blue light ravened out at the heretic leader. Nothing much seemed to happen. Macharius reached out for him and grabbed the glittering chain of office that dangled from his neck. He attempted to use it to hold the High Priest in place while he brought the chainsword to bear.

The arch-heretic leapt backwards, twisting away from the incoming blow, the force of his movement breaking the chain and leaving the remnants dangling from Macharius's hands. The High Priest fell over and scrambled away. More and more psykers were coming awake and aware now but there was something strange about them. They moved like automatons, as if their souls were still floating in some distant hell and only dimly connected to their bodies.

Corporal Hesse took a bullet through his chest and then a hail of them through his body but somehow he kept moving, still shooting. Ivan staggered as a shell ricocheted off his metal cheeks. Macharius looked around for his prey, failed to find him and then jammed something in the body of the metal statue with blazing wings. He dived to one side as it exploded and only then did I realise what he had done.

He had set a grenade into the gas-tubes and started a chain reaction of explosions within it. A huge gout of flame erupted, setting fire to the ceremonial hangings. The air began to fill with the stink of smoke and flame and burning flesh. Drake stood outlined by some aura that protected him and Macharius. I gestured for the others to follow me and we scrambled towards them. I have no idea why I did that.

We seemed to have run out of options.

OceanofPDF.com

Casualty List Hesse
Corroborative Evidence Cross-Reference 42K9-Cross-Reference J6.
Under seal.

Extract from Record of Deaths, Battlegroup Sejanus, Karsk Campaign 05.07.40012
Quota Record Form 6a
Approved: Varisov, L, Colonel 7th Belial
Compiled: Parzival, K, Captain 7th Belial
Forwarded to Battlegroup HQ, Karsk

Section 124: Record of Deaths in Combat
Site: Irongrad.

Hesse, O, Corporal, Imperial Baneblade *Indomitable*.
Cause of Death: Enemy Action.
Notes: Recommended for Order of Merit, Gates of Irongrad, Approved Pending Investigation.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Flames tore through the chamber. The robes I was wearing started to smoulder. The backwash of heat made my eyes suddenly dry. The smoke made me cough. Most of the heretics were untouched by the flames. The heat and the fire did not seem to affect them. I kept moving towards Inquisitor Drake and Macharius and Anna. I felt sure that the inquisitor's shield would offer some protection but I was not certain that it would enable any of us to survive once the heretics decided to extinguish our lives.

Anton and Ivan were right behind me and the Understudy was with them. I looked around to see if I could see Corporal Hesse. I caught sight of him out of the corner of my eye and wished that I had not. He was still alive. His uniform was ablaze. He was screaming and his flesh was starting to melt and run. Large chunks had been torn off by the explosion and blackened skin stood out against white bone. I was going to turn back and help him but the crowd was already starting to close around him as more and more of the heretic bodyguards entered the great chamber.

I dived within the bubble of energy surrounding the inquisitor. I landed with one arm on Anna's shoulder and withdrew it swiftly before she could break it. It was stupid. She had already decided I was not an enemy or she would have killed me. Immediately the air felt cooler and the sound of explosion and fire and screaming was dulled as if heard through a thick armourglas window. We glared around, desperate, at once seeking escape and sure of the fact that we would not find it. Macharius looked at Drake.

‘Is there anything you can do?’ He did not look defeated. He was simply asking if there were any options. There was no fear written on his face. I’m sure it was inscribed on mine.

I looked around. There was no sign of the High Priest. He seemed to have disappeared into the fire and smoke. I wished we could do the same. Drake gestured for us to follow him and began to move towards the wall. I’m guessing that he had some sense other than sight to guide him, because I could see nothing through that fearful blaze.

Behind us, the kneeling heretics began to stir from their trance. Possibly the bodyguards were trying to fight their way forwards through the flames – I could not see them, so there was no way to tell. I simply tried to keep close to the inquisitor because I had no idea what would happen if I stumbled outside the sphere of protection that he currently radiated.

Ahead of us, I saw an archway. We passed through it and down a flight of stairs, moving as fast as we could, trying to put as much distance between ourselves and any pursuit as was possible. We had no idea what we were doing now, not even Macharius, I am sure. Our plan had been to disrupt the ritual and kill the High Priest if we could.

He had escaped us even though Macharius still held his chain of office clenched in his fist. I was not sure why he still had it. Perhaps he was planning on keeping it as a souvenir if ever we got out of this place.

We raced downstairs and encountered more guards coming up. We must have been quite a sight. Our robes were burned and smouldering and we were surrounded by a halo of power. We did not give them any chance to react. We did not pause to bluff. We gave no thought to the fact that there might be hundreds of them coming towards us.

We simply leapt into battle. Macharius was in the lead, chopping with the chainsword that he still held, shooting with a pistol that he had picked up somewhere. Nothing short of a Space Marine could have stood against him at that moment. He fought like a berserk ork, full of terrifying fury with no regard for his own safety.

At least, that’s the way it looked. I’m sure that within his calculating brain he had already worked out the odds of survival and attacking with such passionate fury was simply what he thought to be the optimal strategy. In any case, he cut his way down to a landing, leaving a trail of dead and dismembered bodies behind him, painting the walls with blood and entrails.

We raced along in his wake, shooting survivors, putting the wounded out of their misery and occasionally, when we got a clear shot, aiming over his shoulders and taking out some of the enemy ahead.

I fought almost back to back with Macharius. A screaming heretic dived towards him, aiming the butt of a lasgun at the back of the general's head. Macharius turned a fraction of a second too late to stop him. I could tell from the expression on his face that he knew the heretic was going to connect. I pulled the trigger on the shotgun. The force of the blast knocked the heretic backwards even as it sprayed Macharius with his blood. The general nodded to me in acknowledgement of what I had done and returned to killing. I saved Macharius's life there but it's certain he saved mine a dozen times simply by killing the enemy near me. Under the circumstances it seemed impolitic to keep score although I am certain, in this, as with so many things, Macharius forgot nothing. His nod was in recognition of a debt between us, one that would eventually be repaid.

When I was not there to cover his back Anna was, moving gracefully, precisely and with eye-blurring speed. She seemed as inhuman as a Space Marine as she kicked and clawed and shot. She had the same terrifying speed and grace.

I'll say one thing for the heretics – they were brave. Even in the face of Macharius's terrifying rampage they stood their ground and were killed to a man. Maybe they simply had no choice. Maybe they did not have time to realise what was happening. To me, everything seemed to be happening with the slowness of a nightmare, which is often the way things happen when you're in combat. Taken by surprise, perhaps they simply did not have time to react and what I think of as courage was simply a stunned lack of response.

Suddenly the fight was over. The heretics were all dead. We stood on a huge landing that looked out over one side of the cathedral. Beneath us an army of fire-winged angels stood poised for flight. Above us, in the central sanctuary, explosions still raged.

'At least we've disrupted the ritual,' said Drake. 'And bought ourselves some time.'

'How much?' Macharius asked.

Drake shook his head. 'Perhaps a day, if we are lucky.'

Looking around I could see the same look of disappointment on every

face, except that of Macharius. After the carnage we had wrought, we had hoped for more.

‘The High Priest is still alive. He is the locus of all this,’ said Drake. ‘The vessel of all the power. He will be able to bring the psychic backlash under control. I am sure of it.’

‘It looks like we need another plan,’ Macharius said, obviously not a man to let a little adversity discourage him.

‘What are we going to do now, sir?’ I asked.

He turned and stared out the window for a moment, looking at all of the aircars flying below us.

‘We need to get out of here,’ Macharius said. ‘There’s nothing more to be done in the city. We won’t get another chance at the High Priest of the Angel of Fire. They’ll be on their guard now.’

Drake shook his head wearily. He was tired and pale but you could see that a formidable will still drove him onwards. He was not going to admit to any weakness in front of us. I doubt very much that the man had admitted to any weakness even to himself. He was that sort. ‘We still need to stop them. We’ve delayed the ritual for a while. They’ll start again soon and their daemon-god will manifest himself on the surface of this world.’

‘We need an army to break through,’ Anton said, scratching his face with one long, claw-like hand.

‘Precisely,’ Macharius said. ‘We need an army. Fortunately we know where to find one. And at least we have located the exact point at which we must strike.’

I was astonished by Macharius’s definition of good fortune. Apparently, as far as he was concerned, all we needed to do was make contact with our forces on the surface of Karsk and the problem would be solved.

From the look on his face, you could tell that the general thought that this would prove no insuperable obstacle. Drake nodded agreement. Under the circumstances, I don’t suppose there was anything else he could do. Macharius did not look mad. He looked like a man in full possession of his senses. I suppose in a way he was. He had decided that there was only one way to save the situation and that we needed to proceed accordingly, and there was nothing that I could really disagree with in that. So even if hundreds of leagues separated us from our army, we were going to have to make contact with it.

‘We will have to do it soon,’ Drake said. ‘We’ve done no more than buy ourselves a little time.’

‘Then we’d best get going,’ Macharius said in a tone that brooked no dispute.

Macharius had already decided the best way out of the city. His brain never stopped calculating, even when the odds against him seemed insurmountable. ‘We need to get to the airfield and we need to get our hands on a flyer.’

He had it all worked out in his mind you see, and he could say things like that as if we were not on our own in the middle of a hostile city. And for all the self-evident madness of his words, there was a confidence about him that made you believe it was possible. We walked through the cathedral as if we were flanked by Chapters of Space Marines, with Macharius in the lead and Drake just behind him and the five of us, the Understudy, Anton, Ivan, the New Boy and myself swaggering to the rear.

Fortunately for us everything in the cathedral was in chaos. The surviving prisoners must have put up an epic fight against the heretics and it seemed as if the sheer boldness of our attack on the High Priest had stunned them.

I could understand why. If I had been in their position I would not have believed that so small a group of men would have assaulted so strongly held a position myself.

In any case, it worked to our advantage. We raced through the chaos, just one more group of uniformed men, apparently dithering as the heretics tried to reassert control of the situation. We did our best to keep to the emptier ways of the cathedral but when we had to, we shouldered our way across packed corridors and massive naves with all the confidence that Macharius inspired.

No one questioned us and soon, by devious ways, we found ourselves on an emergency walkway, looking down over one of the massive gas pipes that fed the fires of the cathedral. We raced across it. It was as broad as a military highway. I caught a clear view of the roiling crowd below us. The vast open space around the cathedral was filled with people. They screamed and chanted the name of the Angel of Fire. Obviously, they knew that something was going on within the cathedral and it had stirred them to the edge of the abyss of fanatical madness.

As a soldier of the Emperor it is hard to imagine heretics having faith but

they do. The problem is that their faith is misplaced. Zeal, which in the service of the Emperor would be truly holy, becomes something worse than wickedness. Looking down on the vast maddened crowd, lit by the fiery wings of thousands of evil Angels, I shuddered.

Those people down there had no idea what it was they were so desperately keen to protect. They had been misled or they had misled themselves and there was no time to teach them the error of their ways any more. Time had run out. Now all that was left to us was war, if we could get in touch with our army, if we could warn them what was happening, if they could get here in time to stop the manifestation of a greater daemon or something worse.

I could see that I was not the only one affected by the sight. Drake had paused, looking down over the protective barrier on the edge of the great gas pipe. There was a look of horror on his face and something more, something I would not have expected to see there: sympathy. I dismissed the thought as an illusion created by my own fevered mind. Who ever heard of an inquisitor feeling sympathy for anyone?

Looking down at that seething sea of heretics, I felt only a sort of numbness. All of them seemed lost. Of all of us, only Macharius seemed certain. In some ways, the more terrible the situation became, the more certain he became. The more indecisive we looked, the more decisive he looked. Perhaps that was simply the effect of my own confusion. In any case, I know that at that time Macharius was the rock upon which all our faith settled. He, at least, seemed to have no doubts that he was worthy of such devotion.

We raced along the top of the gas pipe heading towards a vast arched entrance between two towering hab-blocks. As we got closer, I felt the heat of the fire-winged angels once more. They gazed down at us and in that moment they seemed alive and hostile and I wanted very much to be in a place where I never had to look upon them again.

We clambered down the exit ladder from the pipe and landed on the huge pile of trash propped up against the walls of an alleyway. Even here, oceans of rubbish had gathered and scavengers made their way through it seeking whatever pitiful remains would keep them alive, whether it was food or some half-functional thing that they could sell. They gazed at us with blank, uncomprehending eyes. At least their gaze did not hold any fanaticism, only

hunger and a nasty expression that made me glad I was armed. These were men who would do anything to keep themselves alive. I realised then that most of them were beggars who normally would have sought alms in the great square surrounding the cathedral and had been forced out of their normal pitches by the surging crowds and the violence of the uprising. We raced down the narrow alleys between the tumbled mountains of trash. Rats as large as dogs scuttled away from our racing feet. Cockroaches as long as a bayonet dived into the rubbish like soldiers seeking cover in a trench. The stink of decomposing food, of mould and rot mingled with the gassy taint in the air.

My heart pounded. My breath came in gasps. Sweat ran down my face. My eyes felt dry and yet, for all the horrors that I had seen, I was starting to feel strangely optimistic. Despite my worst fears, I was still alive and I was free, although the Emperor alone knew how long that was likely to last. Somehow, we had escaped from that vast horde of heretics, and had not yet been burned alive to feed the terrible god that the heretics were hell bent on summoning. Perhaps the Emperor was watching over us, or at least over Macharius. Until almost the very end he always had that thing that all great commanders need: luck.

It was obvious that we had stirred up a huge hornets' nest. Sirens bellowed out across the city. In the distance I could hear the roar of the crowd surrounding the cathedral. Where we were, all was eerily quiet. It was as if the vast majority of the citizens were huddled in their homes waiting to see what would happen.

At that moment in time, I felt a long way from the certainties of Imperial law. Strangely enough, having been given something to compare it with, I had never been more certain that the Imperium was worthy to rule this place. I even felt a certain nostalgia for the Imperial Guard and its crude, slow-moving, bureaucratic processes. I would have welcomed marching into camp and being surrounded by my comrades more than anything else in the universe just then.

We sloped on through the gathering darkness, not quite certain of what we were going to do except that we were going to follow Macharius to the bitter end.

We huddled down in the shadow of a cave accidentally created in the giant

mound of trash. It must have been some primitive instinct that made us do that, to crawl out of sight, for there was no other real reason. The only people around us were the hordes of scavengers and they paid no more attention to us than anyone else around them. If we had looked weaker or less well armed they would have seen as us as prey but as it was we were untouchable. Overhead aircars quartered the sky. Searchlight beams probed into the darkness. I could not avoid the suspicion they were looking for us.

‘We need to get to the airfield,’ Macharius said. ‘We need to find a vehicle that can get us out of this place.’

He said it as reasonably as a man discussing walking down to the canteen to get lunch. He spoke in that calm, powerful voice and all of us just nodded our heads as if what he was saying was sane.

I will say this about Macharius, he never let the fact that he was planning something completely unreasonable stop him from contemplating the possibility of it. In his mind, to come up with something was to do it. For him, there was no difference between visualising a thing and executing it. He had no doubts in his own competence and somehow he projected the idea that he had no doubts of yours. Drake just nodded as if he saw the sense of this as well, then returned to making inscriptions on his data-slate.

‘We won’t find an aircar in this part of the city,’ Anna said.

‘You are right,’ said Macharius. ‘We’ll need a place where they are more common.’

Wearily, we picked ourselves up and began to move again, looking for a way out of this vast maze of rubbish and scavengers and a way back into the wealthier parts of the city where such things as flying vehicles were available to be stolen.

The first thing we grabbed was a groundcar. It was easy. Anton jimmied open the window with his bayonet. Anna invoked the engine spirits aided by a piece of sanctified wire. There was not much room for all of us inside the car, big as it was, but we crawled in and took to the highway between levels.

Macharius knew where the nearest airfield was. Drake found a route on his slate. He had ingested all the information from the datacores into it before the rising. I drove. It seemed like my duty. I even felt a certain nostalgia to be behind the controls of a vehicle again although it was nothing compared to a Baneblade.

Everywhere we passed signs of warfare. There were burned-out vehicles at numerous crossroads. Some of them bore the marking of our regiment, an ominous omen. Gangs had risen across the city, taking advantage of the general chaos to go on a looting spree. I saw nobles and outcasts fighting in the streets, for the pure unadulterated joy of combat, as far as I could tell. One side certainly did not need the loot. Or maybe they were all skanked on blaze.

In other sections, the Sons of the Flame were already out in force. They moved through the streets with companies of bodyguards, flaming halos surrounding their heads. Here they rounded up opposition for burning. There they preached a sermon to a fast-gathering crowd. I watched them all scroll by through the armourglass of the groundcar window. I listened to Drake's directions and kept the vehicle on course. In the back, most of them slept. Macharius sat wide-eyed, planning. The Understudy's eyes were sinister black pits. He said nothing, did not move. I wondered what was going on in his head. Anna studied the crowds with her usual calm.

Over everything there still brooded the terrifying sense of presence. I was not surprised by the hysteria in the city. Everyone must have felt it as much as I did. They were reacting in their own way and I suspect the thing the priests worshipped was feeding on it and drawing strength. When I caught sight of the faces of Ivan and Anton and the New Boy I knew they felt as I did, possibly worse, that reaction to what we had done was setting in. We had done our best and we had failed and time was running out.

The road twisted and turned through the hive, climbing levels and then swooping lower, curving back in on itself like the spiral staircases of the cathedral. The Angels watched over every junction, perched on every building. Crowds were visible in every square. There seemed to be a lot of burning going on. Drake followed my gaze.

'They are making sacrifices. It is all part of the great ritual now.' He looked sick, but returned to making inscriptions in incomprehensible Inquisitorial runes.

OceanofPDF.com

Document under seal. Extract From the Decrypted Personal Files of Inquisitor Hyronimus Drake.
Possible evidence of duplicity on the part of former High Inquisitor Drake.
Cross-reference to Exhibit 107D-21H (Report to High Inquisitor Toll).

I dread what is happening here. The evil of what is being done hangs over us like a vast cloud of doom. I sense terrible flows of power here and a portal being opened into the deepest pits from which the hell-spawn of Chaos crawl. It is difficult to remember that not far from here the mightiest force assembled in recent Imperial history stands waiting. Yet, for all its power, it will be useless unless it moves into action. When the Angel of Fire bestrides this planet once more, not all our army's strength will avail it.

The High Priest of the Angel is still alive and while that is the case all that seething energy has a focus and all of it is tied to the thing he wishes to summon. Our reprieve, if reprieve it is, is but temporary.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this business is the thought that we have provoked this manifestation of cosmic evil. If we had not come here, perhaps the pyromancers would never have summoned up the will or courage to begin their summoning. Perhaps we have driven them to it as the only recourse in the face of our overwhelming might.

I must scourge myself for letting such thoughts skitter into my mind. We cannot take responsibility for the evil heretics do. We can only take responsibility for any failure on our part to stand against it. It is our duty to prevent the Angel of Fire becoming manifest if we can. This is the deed the Emperor asks from us.

Looking at my companions, it would be easy to believe the task is hopeless. We are so few and the enemy are so many. Still, in the history of the Imperium the faithful few have often overcome the heretical multitudes. Think of Saint Leone facing the Hordes of the Mithralists, or the Sage Paladine's band of monks bringing the word to the Cabal of Jewelmakers. No, there are many examples in Testament and Scripture to stiffen our spines and harden our resolve in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds. Ah, but how easy it is to be inspired when reading such things in the comfort of a distant reflectorium. How difficult it is to keep the faith in the face of such overwhelming evil.

Nonetheless, we must persevere, and we must, in the name of the Emperor, triumph. If we do not, the consequences will be dreadful for this world and the Imperium.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

We passed through a massive arch and emerged onto a concrete plain with a view out over the great lava deserts and the vast array of industrial structures that surrounded the great hive of Irongrad.

I could see pipes running away into the distance and gigantic refineries and huge hangars containing who knows what. It was not that which held my attention though – it was the airfield itself. A number of flying vehicles were arriving and departing. There was a good deal of military traffic, doubtless part of the local air force fighting against the Imperial Guard armies to the south. There were several tethered airships of enormous size, used for interhive transport during times of peace and which had now been requisitioned as troop carriers. Even as we watched, we could see monstrous lines of infantrymen queuing up to board them from massive docking towers.

This looked to be as close as we were going to get so we piled out of the groundcar and made ourselves ready. At the edge of the huge airstrip we could see a number of small flying vehicles. It was then that Anton mentioned something that I was sure was on all of our minds. ‘Can anybody here fly one of those things?’ Anton said. ‘Or is this the time that I begin my improvised pilot training?’

‘Both the inquisitor and I can do so,’ said Macharius.

‘I can too, sir,’ said Anna.

That ended all argument. It was now simply a case of moving downslope,

passing the perimeter defences of the airfield and getting aboard one of those flyers. Easy, I told myself sarcastically.

‘We going through the wire,’ Macharius said. He brandished the chainsword that he had carried all the way from the cathedral just so that there was no doubt about how he intended to do that. ‘There are guard towers down there and there will be divination engines set to spot intruders.’

‘I can take the towers and override the systems, sir,’ said Anna. She seemed completely confident in her ability to be able to overcome whoever was guarding those engines, justifiably so, I suppose.

‘It would take too much time,’ said Macharius. ‘We need to go now,’

‘As you wish, sir.’

‘Can you shield us, high inquisitor?’ Macharius asked.

Inquisitor Drake nodded. Obviously, they trained inquisitors in more things than theology wherever he had studied. He said, ‘Stay very close to me, all of you. If you get beyond a few arms’ length, you will be out of the range of my protection.’

We stayed close to the inquisitor like we knew what he was talking about. None of us liked relying on psyker powers for our protection even if those powers were wielded by an inquisitor.

We began to move down the side of the hive, cautiously, looking for divination engines and minefields and all of the other things that you might expect to encounter around a military airfield in time of war.

If there were minefields, no one had marked them and I found myself becoming more and more tense with every step I took. Macharius led us to a spot between the guard towers. His keen gaze scanned backwards and forwards and I knew that he was looking for sentries patrolling the open space between those towers. I could not see any, but that did not mean they were not there. Perhaps they were standing, smoking, behind one of the pillars that supported the wire. Perhaps they had already spotted us and were lying in wait, weapons ready to open fire as soon as we got within range. It’s astonishing the things that your mind comes up with in situations like this.

We reached the edge of the wire and took up positions to cover Macharius in case anyone closed with us while he was cutting. He slashed through the wire with one sweep of the chainsword and then paused for a moment,

listening.

If any alarm had been given it was not audible to us, but that did not mean anything. Somewhere, in some distant control bunker perhaps, a red light was flashing and alarms had started to sound.

Macharius gestured for Anton to go through. Anton did so and then the rest of us followed until only Macharius and I were left on the far side of the wire. I gestured for him to go ahead like some polite gentleman at the door of his club in the upper reaches of the hive. Macharius grinned and went through and I took a last look around to make sure that no one was creeping up on us from this side of the fence and then I followed him myself.

We began to move across the plascrete plain, moving closer to the flyers that Macharius had already picked out. They were small local transport models of a variant I was not familiar with. They were armoured though and they had turrets, which might well prove useful, providing no one was already in them and ready to shoot us down. It all seemed to be going too well. I thought for a moment that the luck of Macharius or the Blessing of the Emperor shielded us still. It was Ivan, as usual, who had to spoil things by pointing out that this was not in fact the case.

‘Watch out,’ he said, indicating off towards the control bunkers of the airstrip with the barrel of his lasgun. I immediately saw what he meant. From out of the central bunker, a number of wheeled vehicles had emerged and were moving in our direction as fast as they could be driven. Either the alarm had been given or someone had spotted us and mustered the guards. It looked like we were going to have a fight on our hands and it was not a fight that we could win.

‘Run,’ said Macharius, moving towards the nearest of the flyers.

I don’t think I have ever covered ground as quickly as I did then and I suspect that the same was the case for the others. Ground crew surrounded the flyer. They had been running checks on the systems and preparing the vehicle for flight. One of them looked at us and shouted something. Anton did not wait to see what would happen next. He pulled the trigger on his lasgun and burned the man down.

I heard the roar of machine engines close behind us and turning I saw the enemy vehicles were almost upon us. I aimed my shotgun at one of the buggies. The huge balloon tyre exploded and the vehicle skidded into

another buggy with a crash of metal on metal.

Men screamed as they were crushed between the two. The others opened fire on us. We kept moving towards the flyer, shooting at the ground crew, even though they were not armed. None of us wanted one of them to get inside and disable the vehicle or even attempt a take-off before we got there. Sirens were sounding in the distance now and I could see the lights of more buggies coming closer.

We were within the shadow of the flyer when the rest of buggies rolled to a stop and disgorged their cargo of armed men. I counted at least twenty of them, all of them in the uniforms of the local defence forces. One of them was a priest of the Angel of Fire. I suspected that they were in every important, strategic location, overseeing the local warriors in exactly the same way as our commissars oversaw us. At the sight of that red-robed heretic, my heart sank.

The alarm had very definitely been given and if we did not manage to get away in this flyer, it was obvious that we were never going to manage to get away at all.

Macharius had already leapt on board along with the inquisitor, and the others were following them up the loading ramp. Only the Understudy and myself were on the ground now. I pumped the shotgun and aimed at the priest and pulled the trigger. He saw what I was going to do and raised his arms in a gesture that I am sure had some cryptic, mystical significance. He never got to complete it before something took his head off. I looked around and saw Anna standing there with that huge gun in her hand.

Whatever protected those heretic psykers from las-bolts clearly had no effect whatsoever against those high-calibre, sanctified slugs.

The guards kept coming closer. I kept shooting and backing away up the ramp on the back of the flyer. Metal flexed under my feet even as las-fire melted the metal of the walkway. The smell reminded me of the factorum workshops of my youth with their casting forges and sacrosanct welding engines.

The flyer began to move, taking off even with the loading bay open. I tumbled forwards and I felt the shotgun slip out of my grasp. I clutched it tight and then a claw-like hand grabbed my shoulder and pulled me backwards with such a jerk that I almost fell over. The Understudy had

caught me and was dragging me inside.

As ever, he ignored the shots of our enemies as if he simply could not see them. This time one of them hit him and I smelled burning cloth and burning flesh. He grunted but he did not scream and he kept pulling and I kept scrambling and then the loading bay ramp began to fold itself into flight position and the movement of its hydraulic systems tumbled us into the body of the aircraft.

I heard strange sounds as the flyer's systems creaked under the strain of the take-off: the sizzling sounds of melting paint and metal where las-fire impacted on the hull. Worse than that was the thunder of metal on metal as some sort of heavy weapon was brought to bear. The hull gave way as if an ogryn were hitting it with a sledgehammer. Dents appeared and the flyer began to wobble in the air as if the force of the shooting was driving us off course.

I lay on the floor gasping and trying to calm my nerves. I have never minded being in a tank when it was under fire but there was something about being in an aircraft in similar circumstances that made me want to void myself with fear.

I forced myself to stand upright despite the lurching of the aircraft. A loud scream echoed within the hull and I looked around quickly to see what had caused the panic. It was only Anton shrieking with pure pleasure, as if this was some sort of joyride and he was some sort of child. I fought down the urge to punch him and instead turned to face the Understudy.

I wanted to take a look at his wound but he had already stripped away his officer's jerkin and was inspecting the scorched skin beneath. It looked nasty. There was a huge blister that had burst and peeled away revealing the moist, sticky flesh beneath. I began to rummage through the emergency medical kit near the rear loading-bay door. Within a few moments I found what was needed and was spraying the damaged skin with synthi-flesh. It closed over the wound, filled with air bubbles and resembled nothing more than a large wart but it would protect the damaged flesh until it could heal. The Understudy nodded as if to thank me and then sat down and strapped himself in.

I looked forwards and I could see that Macharius and Inquisitor Drake were within the cockpit, wrestling with controls. They seemed to be moving them at random and the flyer jumped all around the sky.

Had they gone mad, I wondered?

I looked at the porthole and realised that there was some semblance of sanity in what they were doing. Heavy bolter fire tracked our flight and sometimes impacted on the armoured hull. I could also see that there were other flyers coming in pursuit. I looked at Anton and Ivan and I said, ‘Can you two lazy bastards do something? Doesn’t this flying heap of junk have some turrets that you could be inside?’

They looked at me as if I was speaking another language. If it had been a tank and if it had been on the ground they would have taken up position at once but outside the environment that they were familiar with, the idea had never occurred to them.

‘Why don’t you go bloody fly the thing?’ Anton asked.

‘I would but we already have two people doing that,’ I replied.

‘Well maybe you should take your own advice then!’ Rather than arguing with the idiot I decided to do just that. I found a ladder that led up to the topside turret and in a few seconds I was strapping myself in and chanting litanies that I hoped would activate the weapon.

I ran through the invocation drills with my hands, pushing down the sacred spheres that I hoped would perform the same function as they did on a ground vehicle. I grabbed the handles of the weapon in exactly the same way as I would have grabbed the handles of a similar one in a tank. And then I leaned forwards and looked through the sight and got my first view of our surroundings and the things that pursued us.

The exterior of the hive skimmed by below. Enormous towers rose like tall, narrow fungi from the side of a mossy hill. Industrial effluent ran down the terraces like lava down the side of a volcano. I could see the multi-coloured lights of the jewelled windows of the hab-blocks and vehicles going about their journeys below us. In the distance, a couple of similar flyers to the one that we were in pursued us. They were already shooting with heavy bolters.

I put in a comm-net ear bead and listened but all I could hear was Macharius talking into the local system. ‘We need to take those down now,’ he said calmly. ‘If we don’t we’ll have other airborne swarming all over us in a few minutes.’

I suspected that that was going to be the case anyway but now did not seem like the time to argue about it. Instead I concentrated on shooting and

sent a stream of heavy bolter fire towards one of the oncoming flyers.

It swerved to one side, an angry insect trying to avoid being swatted by a drunken man. I kept shooting and tracking it but it moved too fast for me and I had no skill with this weapon.

It was luck more than anything else that destroyed my target flyer. As the pilot swerved to avoid my shot, one of his flyer's stubby wings struck the side of a nearby building. Immediately, the flyer swerved out of control, tumbling end over end and wing over wing. The damage would not have destroyed it if the pilot had been able to regain control but he simply did not have time and his tumbling vehicle smashed into the side of another hab-block and exploded. Splinters of broken metal smashed the nearby windows. A gas jet within the building ignited, causing blowback. A trail of flame shot out of the side of the hab and I was very glad that I was not alongside when it happened.

The other enemy flyer had gained altitude and was somewhere above us. I could tell by the bolter fire contrails coming down in the sky. Looking up I saw the vehicle's running lights. I sat as far back in the seat as I could and the guns tilted upwards but they couldn't elevate enough to get our pursuer into my sights. There was nothing I could do from the present angle. I spoke into the comm-net and said, 'Take us up and I can get a second shot at the bastard.' As an afterthought I added, 'Sir.'

I heard Macharius chuckle and we began to swing upwards. At the same time other turrets on our own craft opened fire and I guessed that Ivan and Anton had finally decided to join the party. All three of us managed to target the flyer but it was just as armoured as our own vehicle and it withstood the impact.

The enemy weapons had found the range now and they kept shooting at us as we kept shooting at them. It was simply a case of which flyer's armour gave out first or which of us found a weak spot in the other's hull. I began to play my turret's fire over the enemy flyer. The impact points sparked. Nothing gave way.

We gained altitude and then suddenly, sickeningly, we flipped over and looped down behind the enemy. I dangled upside down in the turret, trying to stay focused. The other pilot panicked. He veered to one side. We kept shooting, hammering the vehicle with our fire. Macharius dived suddenly and brought us alongside. We kept firing, our bolter shots impacting all

along the side. Macharius nudged the other flyer with the stubby wing of our vehicle, forcing it into a nearby wall. It smashed hard, hull breaking apart. Our fire finally took effect, hitting some vital internal part. The explosion turned the enemy flyer into a fireball.

We cheered and flew on, racing over the hive exterior like a runaway rocket, staying low and dodging at speed between the buildings. I rotated my turret so I could look behind us to scan the sky for pursuit. I saw the running lights of hundreds of vehicles but nothing that looked as if it was coming for us.

I offered up a prayer of thanks to the Emperor as I watched Irongrad recede into the distance. It loomed behind us like an impossibly vast mountain, covered in glittering contrails of light and lava. At its peak, the monstrous figure of the Angel of Fire loomed, fiery wings spread wide and illuminating the swirling multi-coloured clouds above it. I had a sense of an ominous terrifying presence growing where it stood.

‘What the hell is going on down there?’ I heard Anton ask.

It took me long moments to see what he meant. On the vast industrial perimeter of the hive, it looked as if rivers of fire were boiling up from underground springs. The earth was cracking, buildings had tumbled. Pipes were broken. In a dozen places they vented flames. Ahead of us the wastelands were split by great fiery chasms. Lava bubbled forth, forming rivers and lakes. The flyer carried us closer. The sight was awesome. I was reminded of our original landing site. It looked as if a new lava sea was being born in front of us.

‘I don’t know,’ I said, ‘but I do not like it one little bit.’

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Once the city was well behind us, Macharius set the flyer down in the desert. He did not give any explanations. He merely picked a flat-topped mesa and landed. All of us climbed out and began to inspect the flyer and I understood why he had done so. The aircraft was enormously beaten up. In places the hull looked as if it was just about to fall apart. Somehow the general had nursed the flyer this far but I doubt that it would have gone much further.

‘Never an adept around when you want one,’ said Anton with his usual attempt at humour.

‘There are other things to worry about even if we can fly much further,’ said Macharius.

‘Sir?’ I asked.

‘If we get too close to our army we risk being shot down by our own air-cover. This is a heretic vehicle with heretic beacons and I doubt anyone will believe us if we tell them who we are.’

‘Bad security, anyway,’ Drake said. ‘If any enemy aircraft are in the area and intercept the call, they can kill you with one strike.’

I looked out into the distance. A massive dust storm was moving across the desert, a monstrous, moving cloud that obscured everything in its way. It took me a second to realise it was no dust storm.

‘I think the point has just become moot,’ I said.

Inside all those clouds of dust was a huge army. I could see the enormous

shadowy shapes of Baneblades and Shadowswords, each a mobile fortress of plasteel and ceramite, each giving a sense of total invulnerability. All around them were thousands of Leman Russ battle tanks and even more Chimera armoured personnel carriers. Valkyries swarmed the air above them like a cloud of angry hornets. It looked like the Imperial Guard had decided to return to Irongrad in force. Macharius must have seen this from the cockpit. It was obviously why he had chosen this spot.

'I think we have some trouble,' said Anton. I immediately understood what he meant. Some of those Valkyries were descending towards us. Eagle-eyed pilots had spotted us and were coming to investigate. I prayed to the Emperor that they would ask questions first and shoot later. I was not entirely sure that I would do that under the circumstances but I hoped that the pilots might prove to be somewhat less aggressive.

Macharius had already thought of that. An emergency flare arced skywards, set by the hands of the Lord High Commander himself. I immediately understood his thinking. If we were scouts and spies we would not draw attention to ourselves like that, not unless we were very stupid, which is a possibility you can never rule out when dealing with some. I hoped the pilots would have more respect for our intelligence than that. I knew it would not be long before we found out.

Soon a Valkyrie hovered in the air above us, weapons trained on us. We kept our hands in the air as a second airship descended and soldiers spilled out covering us with their lasguns.

'Keep your hands in the air, and don't make any sudden moves,' said an officer.

'Captain Argus, is that you?' Macharius said. I was suddenly very glad of his talent for being able to remember people's names. The officer's jaw dropped. He looked like a man who had just encountered a ghost, which is exactly what he thought he was seeing.

'Lord High Commander Macharius?' he said. He looked astonished, as if he could not quite believe what he was seeing.

'In the flesh,' Macharius said. 'We talked when I decorated you after the Battle of Khalion.'

As with so much that Macharius did, it was perfect. It let Captain Argus know that he was exactly who he said he was. No spy could have known a little detail like that. You could see the captain standing a little bit straighter

as he came under the general's eye. All of the other soldiers suddenly looked as if they were at attention. I am somewhat proud to report that they did not stop covering us with their weapons though.

'And I must see General Sejanus at once,' said Macharius. 'There is much that needs to be done and very little time to do it in. This world is in the gravest danger and we are the only people that can save it.'

It should have sounded utterly fantastic, completely implausible. But when Macharius said things like that, men jumped to obey. He strode forwards and no one pulled the trigger of a lasgun. They might have done if it was me or Anton or Ivan but they would not do it to him. Drake followed him and Anna then the Understudy. To my surprise, Macharius beckoned the rest of us forwards as well. 'You've been my bodyguard this long,' he said. 'You can manage it for a bit longer.'

It was spoken with just the right amount of weariness and humour. We stepped into the Valkyrie filled with pride and a desire to do our duty.

Within seconds we were aloft and heading into the middle of the great dust cloud raised by the army.

As we flew, the pilot must have made a report, for entire squadrons of Valkyries dropped into place around us and formed an honour guard for our protection. I looked at Macharius again as he stood there, calm and implacable, and I began to feel as if I was standing at the centre of the world and that it was moving around me to wherever Macharius went. I began to understand some of his confidence and some of his self-belief. He was one of those men that the world really did rotate around, the focus of all attention.

Some of it spilled over onto us. I could see some of the soldiers were looking at us and wondering who we were. We were with Macharius so we must be important. It was a heady feeling and I suppose in some ways it was true. We had come out of the inferno of Irongrad along with the Lord High Commander. We had guarded him as he had guarded us. We were in some sense his comrades-in-arms. I wondered if he would remember that after today. I knew I was always going to.

The Valkyrie set us down beside an enormous headquarters tent, a vast self-erecting pavilion of flexi-metal capable of being set up within minutes and taken down just as fast. It was big enough to hold a dozen Baneblades.

Arcane science let it blend in with its surroundings like those desert-dwelling, colour-changing lizards. We emerged from the aircraft to be greeted by cheering crowds who had obviously braved the settling dust storm to catch a glimpse of the returned Macharius. Somewhere in the midst of the confusion, Anna simply disappeared. One second she was there, the next she had vanished. I looked around but did not see her. I doubted that anything could have happened to her so it must have been of her own free will.

Such was their joy that you would have thought that Mecharius had risen from the dead, which I suppose in their minds he had. They had thought he was lost in the fall of Irongrad and now, beyond all hope, he had emerged from the desert to lead them once more. I began to understand how stories of miracles can cluster around a mortal man. Some of the stories you hear about Macharius today make it sound as if he was superhuman but he was not, not really; he was just a man capable of extraordinary things in a time when such deeds were necessary.

General Sejanus strode forwards to greet Macharius. His face was alight with joy. They embraced like father greeting son and I understood the friendship that existed between them when I saw that. In any other world than the one that had Macharius in it, Sejanus would have dominated the scene. He was a powerfully impressive man, somewhat shorter than Macharius and swarthy, with great bristling moustaches and eyes that glittered with suppressed fury. In the presence of Macharius though he was just another soldier, greeting a hero returned from the wars.

The two of them spoke but I could not overhear what they said and then they turned and walked beneath the huge awning outstretched beside the command vehicle. In its shadows they sat and exchanged words and Macharius beckoned us over and Sejanus spoke.

‘It seems that the Imperium owes you men a debt of gratitude that can never be repaid,’ Sejanus said. We just looked at him. None of us were going to contradict him. It was the sort of thing that every soldier wants to hear and very seldom does. Believe me, in the Imperial Guard, it is not often that you are found worthy of praise by your superiors. When it happens, you luxuriate in it.

‘When it is time, I will see that they are suitably rewarded,’ Macharius said. ‘But right now there is much to be done and very little time to do it in

if we are to save this world from the powers of darkness.'

The two generals began to plan. Orders were barked to servitors, holo-map grids invoked, orderlies came and went. We stood there apparently forgotten. No one had dismissed us so we stayed.

I was on the edge of dozing off when the earth shook. A commotion erupted around the table. I noticed everybody gazing at the map. It crawled and changed even as I watched. In the centre was still the huge angel-topped hive of Irongrad. Around it were still the snaking cables of the great pipelines. There was something else, something new, something that reminded me of what I had seen on my way through Irongrad. The earth was splitting all around the hive. Lines of fire appeared.

'What is going on?' Sejanus asked. Macharius looked at Drake.

'The ritual is nearing its climax. The tectonic plates of the world itself are shifting. The power of the Angel of Fire is manifesting.'

The wastelands were split by great fiery chasms. Lava bubbled forth, forming rivers and lakes. It looked as if a new lava sea was being born in front of us.

'It's a moat,' said Sejanus. 'It won't keep us out for long.'

'It doesn't have to,' said Drake. 'Just long enough for them to finish their ritual and summon the Angel of Fire.'

Macharius looked at them. 'Suggestions? Thoughts?' he asked.

Sejanus looked back at him steadily. 'We could evacuate.' He said in a tone of utmost seriousness. Macharius just stared at him and then they both laughed. It seemed like it was some sort of joke between them but for whatever reason I could not see the funny side. Evacuation seemed like a good idea to me.

'No way to get armour through that except airdrop,' said Sejanus. 'We could request our comrades in the Adeptus Astartes drop on top of the cathedral and interrupt the ritual.'

'Without support, with the number of psykers in there?' Drake asked. 'With a daemon-god about to manifest. They might be able to do it but…'

'But we need to be certain,' Macharius said. 'I will not ask a Chapter of Space Marines to perform a suicide mission unsupported… unless I have to.'

You could see he had something else on his mind. He really did not want

to send the Adeptus Astartes to a potentially fatal last stand but it was not just that.

Later, when I got to know Macharius better, I knew what it was. He did not want them getting all the glory. This campaign was his campaign. The Space Marines were not going to bail out Lord High Commander Solar Macharius. This was going to be a triumph for the Imperial Guard and for its leader or it was going to be nothing.

If that seems selfish and self-aggrandising on the part of Macharius, what can I tell you? He was an Imperial general. Even in the humblest-seeming of those there is a lust for glory. They all want to write their names in the history books and none of them wants to be put there as the fool who was saved, yet again, by the Space Marines. The least of them are like that, even the weakest, the most venal and the most incompetent. Macharius was none of those things.

‘The Death Spectres are tied down on Karsk VII anyway,’ said Sejanus. ‘We need them there.’

Translating that from High Command speak, what he really meant was that he would see himself in hell before he would let the Adeptus Astartes get his share of the glory.

‘Can we neutralise the daemon-summoners?’ Macharius asked.

‘I don’t know,’ said Drake. ‘If we mass all of our sanctioned psykers and I call in all of my agents in place, maybe… We would need to get very close though.’

‘We can send in a strike force mounted on Valkyries and Vultures,’ said Sejanus.

Macharius said, ‘They won’t be able to fight their way into the heart of the Cathedral Zone unsupported and we’d lose too many to the air defences. We need to get our armour in and the bulk of our army behind it. We need to call on the people in the city who hate the priests to rise up and they need to know there is a force there that can support them. I am going to stop those damn heretics now and end their threat once and for all.’

You could tell that he meant that and I would not have given a lot for the chances of any pyromancer he personally encountered surviving. Of course that was something a lot different from breaking into the hive and seizing the cathedral.

‘That’s all very well, but how are you going to do it?’ Drake asked. ‘The

earth is shifting, lava lakes are bubbling up, there's no easy way for us to get through in time.'

He was merely saying what we were all thinking. He was probably the only one there except for the Understudy who had the nerve to question Macharius. Macharius glared out through the canopy.

'We will find a way,' Macharius said.

We were not the most optimistic of groups. All of us looked at the great holo-map and contemplated the possibility of failure.

We knew we could take the hive. We had already done so once. That was not in doubt. What was in doubt was our ability to bridge the great moats of lava sliding into place around the city in time to stop the ritual. None of us wanted to contemplate what would happen if we were still on-planet when the Angel of Fire manifested. One look at Drake's sickly features was enough to convince me that it was not likely to be a pleasant experience.

There was a growing horror in the chamber. In part I suspect it was a product of the manifestation of the Angel. Even people with as much sensitivity to psychic events as a desert rock could sense that there was something wrong. There was a pressure in the air such as you get before a great storm. A cloud of gloom and despair had settled over our entire army. Macharius stared hard at the holo-map. All of his attention was focused on it. He glared at it as if he believed his hope of rebirth in the Emperor's Light depended on it. I suppose in a way it did. Concentrating, Macharius did not fidget. He merely stood there, statue-still, looking completely at rest. His gaze was fixed unwaveringly on the map, on the great hive that it was his desire to reclaim. A cold light burned in his eyes. It was as if he was staring at some hated personal enemy.

The rest of the command bustled around, bringing dispatches, discussing matters in low voices in the corner of the room. Sejanus lolled in an old padded armchair that looked like it had been brought directly from his family estate, and smoked a cheroot. Clouds of vile-smelling smoke drifted towards the ceiling of the pavilion and were sucked out into the even fouler air beyond by the extractors. The flexi-metal sides of the enormous tent bulged and rippled in response to pressure differentials. The Lion Banner of Macharius hung once more beneath the central frame of the tent. I wondered where they had dug that up from.

The Understudy looked like a machine that had shut down. His face was

slack. His eyes half-closed. He was staring at the map as well and I wondered what he was seeing with those strange blue eyes.

Anton and Ivan stood in a corner like schoolboys in our old class in Ironforge Academy. They seemed to be hoping that no one would notice them and it was perfectly possible that in this august company no one would. I walked over to them.

Anton ran a bony hand across the scar on his forehead. ‘Tense, isn’t it?’ he said and grinned his idiot grin.

‘They are just waiting for you to come up with a brilliant idea and save the day,’ Ivan said. ‘You think they have anything to drink around here?’

His voice was gruff. Booze was on his mind. I could tell he was just as tense as Anton in his own way.

‘Not many of us left now,’ I said, saying what was on my mind. We had known each other so long they caught my meaning instantly. I had been thinking about Hesse. It had been the first time I really had time to do so. I felt oddly guilty about that. Hesse had been with us for a long time, had been a real link to the old days in the *Indomitable* and yet his death had completely vanished from my mind until the present. Well, I told myself, I had had plenty of other things to think about.

‘Just us three now and the New Boy,’ Anton said. ‘I am not sure the Understudy is all there.’

‘We’ll raise a glass to them in time,’ said Ivan. ‘If we can find a bloody glass and the bloody time.’

We looked at each other. I could tell we were all thinking about Hesse and Oily and the lieutenant and all the others who had passed on in the Emperor’s service. We had lost comrades and friends before but never so many so quickly. There was something about this place that felt accursed and I put that down to more than the growing influence of the ritual. Now that events had slowed down and I had time to think I felt their absence the way you feel a missing tooth in your mouth. It was uncomfortable and yet you could not stop inspecting it.

‘What do you think is going to happen?’ Anton asked. He sounded scared. I knew then I should be worried. If fear had managed to drill a hole through the solid rock of Anton’s skull, things must be getting really bad.

‘I don’t know,’ I said, ‘but if anyone can think of something Macharius will.’

I was astounded to discover as I said the words that I really believed them. I had been mouthing them for reassurance but they came out full of faith, not doubt. I was as much surprised as anybody else. As if I had provoked him, I suddenly heard the Lord High Commander speak. ‘Do you see it?’

All eyes were on him. Sejanus rose from the chair and strolled across to the holo-map. ‘See what?’ Drake said, voicing what we were all thinking.

‘No,’ Sejanus said, with what I thought was commendable honesty.

‘The pattern, Sejanus, the pattern.’

‘There may be one certainly, but I am damned if I see what you mean.’

‘It’s the same one as on the High Priest’s sigil.’

‘It may be so, but I never saw the damn thing.’

Macharius held something out in his hand. It glittered metallically. I realised it was the amulet he had pulled from the High Priest’s neck back in the cathedral. He held it up to the light and it reflected the artificial fires visible in the holo-map. It was as if he was holding a rune made of flame in his hand.

Macharius held the symbol so that the light of the holo-globe was behind it and the shadow of part of the pattern, partially obscured by his clutching fist, fell on the map.

I looked from it to the map, and, you know, by the Emperor I could see that Macharius was right. Those shifting lines of fire were not a moat. They were flowing into the same pattern as the emblem of the Angel of Fire. I did not know whether to be relieved or filled with fear.

It seemed that we were insignificant to whatever power was manifesting itself in Irongrad. It was not creating a flaming barrier to keep us out, except perhaps by accident. It was manifesting a tribute to its own glory and might, reshaping the desert and the earth and the elements of rock and fire into a pattern that was significant only to it.

‘It’s very close to the sign of Tzeentch,’ said Drake. ‘The Changer of Ways. It’s obvious now that you point it out.’

His voice was so soft it was hard to pick out the words. I think he was speaking only to himself. Nonetheless a chill passed through the room. An eerie silence fell. The inquisitor had named one of those names that it is very ill to speak, one of the greatest of all the enemies of humanity. Anton gave out a soft yelp. I understood why. Was it possible that this great daemon-god was going to manifest on the surface of Karsk? If it did, what

would happen then? Even the shadow of its power was already beginning to reshape the land. Once it was fully present, what would it not be capable of?

Sejanus said, ‘We can plot a path through that maze if we’re quick.’

‘How much time do we have now?’ Macharius asked Drake.

The high inquisitor said, ‘Not more than twelve hours – the power is spiking again. I can feel it even from here.’

‘We had better get moving,’ said Macharius, with what I thought was considerable understatement.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Once he had seen the pattern, there was no holding Macharius back. He barked out orders to all of his commanders and sub-commanders, telling them to prepare to advance. Within minutes he had sketched out a basic plan of attack with all the usual trademark details of his genius. He could see the way the lava flows were going to end up. They were not there yet but they would be by the time we were ready to attack. Our forces would sweep in to attack the hive, navigating through the labyrinth of lava. Once we were within the boundaries of the great pattern, our force would divide into three main groups, attacking all of the major southern gates of the city. Our forces were to be ready to shift the weight of the attack at any time, to follow up any breakthrough. At least half the army was held in reserve, to rush forwards when the breakthrough came. In that group would be the bulk of the psykers. They were the ones who were going to be necessary once we got within the city. Having sketched in the outline of this plan, Macharius studied the maps of Irongrad itself. Our route was clear – wherever we broke in we would need to rush down into the cathedral itself and disrupt the great ritual that was taking place.

There was nothing else for it. It was a desperate gamble, a roll of the dice; do or die. I could tell from the way he was smiling that the thought made Macharius happy.

I thought I could understand why. His destiny was once more within his own hands. He was not merely an observer standing by and waiting for the

daemon-god to arrive and take possession of its new domain. He was going to do something about it. He was going to measure himself against the darkest powers in the galaxy. He might not win but he was going to die trying. And we were going to follow him. And the truth of it was, in that moment, I was perfectly happy to do so. At least, doing it his way, we had some chance. It was better than standing back and doing nothing or desperately trying to evacuate when we had no time to do so. We were going to fight and we were going to fight like men and that, in the end, was all we could really ask for.

Headquarters tent became a buzzing hive of activity. Commanders were briefed on the entire plan and rushed off to find their sub-commanders. Orders rippled out through the whole vast nervous system of the army.

Macharius, as he always did, was making sure that everybody knew what they had to do. He looked more alive than at any time since I had first seen him. I realised that this was what he lived for; this was when he was only truly alive. It's a strange thing to say about a man who always seemed so vital. There was always more life in Macharius than in two normal men even when he was at rest, but now he blazed with energy and authority, radiating calm and confidence and certainty that what he was asking could be done, and that filled those around him with a similar confidence.

I asked myself, what would happen if he was wrong? What would happen if the lava was simply flowing into some random pattern and he had simply perceived something that was not there? I realised that the truth of the matter was that it didn't matter. If Macharius was wrong, we were no worse off, and if he was right, we would soon be in a position to take the fight to the heretics.

I looked at Ivan and I looked at Anton and I could see that they were both feeling better. The dread had departed from their faces and they looked as ready for action as I had ever seen them. Even Drake had perked up; he did not look quite so sick. He walked over to a comm-board and began typing in odd combinations on the runic keyboard. I guessed he was getting in touch with his agents within the army. In the midst of all this chaos, I was surprised when Macharius walked over to us. He placed his heavy hand on my shoulder and said, 'Go outside, take a break. There will be a few hours before the preparations to advance are complete. I want you all with me when the final attack begins. You've brought me good luck this far and I'm

not taking the chance of losing it before the end.’

I was at once touched and frightened. I was touched by the fact that Macharius seemed to have some faith in us. I was frightened by the fact that even the great general seemed to believe that he was in need of all the luck he could get.

People will tell you that the great commanders make their own luck, and there is a freighter-load of truth in that statement, but even Macharius seemed to feel he had to do everything he possibly could to stack the odds in his favour. Sometimes, luck is the only difference between victory and defeat. It was strange to see that even a man as confident as Macharius felt the need of some lucky talisman. It was even stranger to look at Anton and Ivan and the Understudy and think that that was what we were to him.

We stepped outside. The dust had settled. As far as the eye could see were armoured vehicles. To the north an eerie glow lit the sky. Far, far off, the hive of Irongrad loomed, a shadowy mountain pierced by caverns of light. At its tip, a fire-winged angel stood ominously waiting. I knew it was not going to wait for long.

‘Well, we’re going with Macharius,’ Anton said.

‘I can tell you’re excited,’ said Ivan. He eyed the distant hive with a certain gloomy satisfaction, pulled out his hip flask and took a swig. He offered it to me.

‘I bloody well am, and so are you, don’t lie about it!’ Anton said. He knew Ivan too well to be fooled.

I drank the fiery liquid. It tasted like Oily’s coolant fluid. I fought back the wave of memories the taste brought with it.

‘Well,’ Ivan asked, sad eyes gazing at me out of his ruined, half-metal face. ‘What do you think?’

‘About what?’

‘About all this. You think we have a chance?’

‘What does it matter what I think? We are going in.’

‘So you don’t then.’ His voice was flat and calm, a man discussing the chances of a dust storm coming in tomorrow morning.

‘I never said that,’ I said.

‘You didn’t have to.’

‘Tell me,’ said Anton. ‘When we were back in the cathedral, did you think we would ever get out alive?’

I shook my head. Ivan did the same.

Anton banged his chest with his fist. ‘We’re still here.’

‘You know,’ said Ivan, ‘the idiot is right.’

‘Of course he is,’ said Anton. His mouth shut like a trap when he realised he had just agreed he was an idiot. He paused for a moment, then pulled out a lho stick and lit it. He coughed wheezily and said, ‘Maybe Macharius is lucky for us. Maybe it’s not that we are lucky for him.’

‘He wasn’t lucky for Hesse,’ I said.

‘I said for *us*,’ said Anton. There was an edge of desperation in his voice, as if he was looking for something to believe.

‘Go read your prop-nov, Anton,’ I said, not unkindly. ‘It’ll take your mind off things.’

The bastard took me at my word. He sat down right there in the gritty sand, pulled the book from his chest-pocket, licked his finger and began flicking through the pages until he reached his favourite part. He squinted in concentration. Strange as it may sound, just looking at him and his dumb book gave me hope. Somehow he had managed to preserve the bloody thing through all the madness.

He ran his finger along the lines, squinting with childish concentration, lips moving as he read the long familiar words. I was not sure I had his faith in Macharius but I had faith in him and Ivan. They would do what needed to be done.

The Understudy emerged from the tent. He walked over to where we were and we saluted him and he saluted us but we did not say anything and neither did he. He simply walked a little further and stood there, back to us, staring into the distance, seemingly unaware of the fact that he was making us uncomfortable. Obviously he just did not care. He was entirely self-sufficient, completely on his own even in the teeming swarms surrounding the headquarters. For all that though, even he had chosen to come outside and stand in the proximity of his comrades.

Perhaps there was still something human in there. Perhaps he simply needed that small crumb of comfort. Or maybe I am wrong, maybe he simply picked a random spot to stand and observe the great enemy in the distance. I am in no position to tell.

Ivan took another swig from his flask and offered it up to Anton, who shook his head, so Ivan passed it on to me. While I was drinking, Ivan

produced his magnoculars and focused them in the direction the Understudy was looking. I do not know what he saw. I never asked. I just took another sip of the cooling fluid and felt it burn its way down my throat.

The Understudy stood there, still as a statue, his arms behind his back, his right hand clutching his left wrist. His head was tilted to one side as if he did not quite understand what he was seeing. Maybe he felt that way about the whole world. It had certainly changed for him. Eventually, he turned and walked back towards us.

‘You better turn in then,’ he said in his strange, rasping voice. ‘We’re going to have an early start tomorrow and the Lord High Commander wants us all to be ready.’

‘We haven’t been assigned quarters, sir,’ said Anton.

‘Then I suggest you make a billet here.’ He said it as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Maybe, for him, it was. He sat down by the edge of the great flexi-metal tent and closed his eyes and went to sleep with the ease of a machine after it has been switched off. Anton shrugged, read a few more pages, then just altered his position so that he was lying down flat with his head pillowed on his arms and then he too was asleep. I looked at Ivan and handed him back the flask. He kept looking off into the distance and drinking. I’m sure he was tired but he did not seem to want to rest.

‘We’ve come a long way from Belial,’ Ivan said. He looked up at the sky, at the stars glittering coldly so far above. One of them might have been the sun around which Belial swung but I was damned if I could pick out which one. ‘A bloody long way.’

I looked at his ruined face. The metal reflected the distant flames dully. I could remember times on other worlds when he had to put boot polish on it so we would not be spotted by the reflection when scouting.

‘Do you regret it?’ I asked. Of all of us, he had the most reason to. He had given more of his flesh and blood to the Emperor than any of us. He laughed softly and shook his head.

‘No. What would we be doing now if we were still on Belial? Working in a guild factorum?’

‘We’d most likely be dead,’ I said. ‘Those gangers wanted our hides.’

He nodded. ‘Just think what it took to get us here. We pissed off the Big Man and his cronies and because of that we joined the Guard. If I hadn’t got

you and Anton into this, none of us would be here.'

He was right in his way. If Ivan had not tried to stop a couple of legbreakers collecting from Old Man Petrov, we would never have fallen foul of the local gangs. He looked at me. 'Sorry about that,' he said.

I shook my head. 'Nothing to be sorry about. What was there for us on Belial – long hours in the guild factorum, dying broke and broken like my old man? At least this way we can say we did something! We saw other worlds. We saw wonders. Hell, we saw Space Marines!'

He laughed softly. 'We did, didn't we? And we're bodyguards of an Imperial High Commander. We're going to be riding with Macharius. Who would ever have thought it?'

I heard the pride in his voice at that. It meant more to him even than seeing those Space Marines. I was not quite so enthusiastic but I tried to say something. What was on my mind slipped out. 'At least when we die, it might make a difference.'

Ivan cocked his head to one side and let out a low whistle as he did, sometimes, when he was curious.

'What do you mean?'

'When we walk into the Emperor's Light we will have done His will. We will have laid down our lives in His service, fighting His enemies. That's got to count for something.'

I think something of my desperation and fear showed in my tone.

'Of course it does,' he said with absolute certainty. 'There is evil in this galaxy, we've both seen it and somebody has to do something about it.'

I smiled at that. He had sounded just the same when we were boys. Beneath all the cynicism and the drinking and the anger, the same idealistic boy was present.

'I was proud of you when you beat up those legbreakers,' I said. I was too. I had been angry as well, knowing the trouble he had got us into, but now did not seem to be the time to say it. I looked over at the sleeping Anton. 'He was too.'

'I am not sure that's a compliment.' Something of his usual joshing tone returned, then he sighed. 'He's not so bad. You could ask for worse at your side when things get rough. He carried me on his back to the medicae station on Jurasik after the attack. Never left till I was patched up.'

'I remember,' I said. We had been in camp when the orks came roaring out

of the jungle and smashed through the perimeter. No time to get into the *Indomitable*, just time enough to snatch up weapons and let fly. It had been touch and go then. No mistake.

He laughed softly. ‘What do you think my sisters would say if they knew we were going to be bodyguards to Macharius tomorrow?’

‘They would not believe it. Neither would my old man. He always told me I would swing for heresy or something else.’ I thought about Anna and what she might say and I realised there was still a possibility he would be proved right.

‘Macharius is a great man,’ Ivan said. ‘A great general, a great leader. He will set the Imperium to rights. He’ll show these heretics what for too before we are done.’

I truly wished I could share his faith in that. Ivan took a final swig at the flask and said, ‘I am going to turn in now. Might be the last chance to get some sleep for a while.’

He just lay back, put his hands behind his head and nodded off. I sat there under the desert sky and studied the strange stars. A growing sense of doom was creeping over me. At some point, I left wakefulness behind but I cannot remember exactly when it was.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The blood-red sun sprang over the horizon. The heat of the day was rising, causing the air over the ash deserts to shimmer. Engines throbbed all around us. Macharius emerged into the daylight to the cheers of assembled soldiers. He raised his hands in a gesture of triumph and strode towards the waiting Baneblade. It has been decorated in his own personal colours, with the Lion seal of his family on it. There was a name too inscribed in flowing Gothic script, *The Lion of Macharius*.

I thought that showed considerable faith in his luck. If anyone knew what to look for, it would make the great tank a target. Or maybe not. Maybe anyone looking at it would suspect a trick. Or maybe I am just too devious for my own good.

Macharius looked at us and gestured for us to come with him, so we did. I did not know what to expect but I followed him up the drop-down ladder and into the interior of the Baneblade. It had been modified more than a little. There was a mass of additional command systems and holo-maps inside the enhanced driver's chamber. It looked like the tech-priests had been very busy in this vehicle. Drake was there and a bunch of people I did not know and whose purpose I could not guess.

Macharius put on a headset trimmed with the oak-leaf clusters of a High Commander. He occupied a throne behind where the commander's normal seat would be. He gestured for the Understudy to take command of the tank, and for me to drive. Anton and Ivan had been assigned to guns. We might

have been his lucky talismans but we were going to have to perform our normal duties under his eyes.

Sliding into the driver's chair was like coming home. I ran my hands over the control altars reassured by the familiar position of everything. Some things felt different. This vehicle would have a different spirit from the old *Indomitable*. I knew I was going to take some time to get used to the *Lion*'s quirks. I hoped there would be enough before we hit the lava moat around the city. I also wondered what had happened to the previous crew. Perhaps this was his reward to us. He had accelerated the process of having us re-assigned to a new Baneblade.

I listened to Macharius respond to the incoming reports from his commanders. I waited for the instruction to fire up the drive cores. It was not long in coming. The New Boy took up position beside me and waited like an apprentice. This machine was definitely different from the *Indomitable*. It felt more alert, keener, more proud. It was not so tired. I sensed all of that as it stirred from its slumber. It did not know me but it accepted me as it had accepted a procession of new drivers throughout the long centuries of its life.

Looking out through the view-scopes I could see thousands of armoured vehicles come to life. Enormous columns began to move out in response to central command's orders. Huge plumes of dust danced skywards. We rumbled forwards towards the fires on the horizon. I felt as if we were driving to the end of the world.

If Macharius felt the same, he gave no sign. His voice was calm. His commands were clear. I paid more attention in the first few minutes to the Understudy as he rasped out his orders quietly.

It felt strange to be listening to him and not the lieutenant. It felt doubly strange to be in this cabin and in the presence of Macharius. But it felt nowhere near as strange as the idea of what we were racing towards under the desert sky of Karsk.

Drake said, 'Incoming signal from Fleet Orbital, sealed channel, highest priority, encrypted.'

'Take it,' Macharius said.

The inside of the Baneblade seemed suddenly quiet. There was something in his voice that made everybody listen. The features of an admiral appeared in the command globe, relayed down from his flagship

somewhere in orbit.

‘Lord High Commander,’ the admiral said. ‘I have read your encrypted instructions and I seek clarification. We are to begin bombardment of Hive Irongrad at eighteen hundred Imperial Standard Time if we do not receive a direct instruction from you countermanding.’

‘Admiral Jensen. Those are my orders. I believe they are perfectly clear.’

‘But, Lord High Commander, your force may still be engaged within the city. And the pyrite refineries. We came here for those.’

‘New priorities have arisen, admiral. I have given you your orders. See that you obey them!’

‘But–’

‘Obey them, admiral. The security of the Imperium may depend on it. I have no time to explain further.’

The admiral nodded. He did not look happy but he looked like he would do as he was told. Macharius cut the communication channel. I shuddered when I realised what Macharius had done. If we failed to stop the ritual, the whole city would be obliterated. He had given orders that would most likely result in all our deaths, then even more chillingly I realised that if those orders were carried out we would probably already be dead.

‘It still might not be enough to stop the ritual,’ Drake said.

‘We have done what we could,’ Macharius said and returned to speaking into the comm-net as if nothing more need be said.

We swept forwards and I could see the lava flows clearly. Jets of liquid stone spurted upwards, incandescent and ruby red. The earth was cracking. Occasionally, the Baneblade shifted oddly in response to the moving ground. It felt like it might spin out of control if I was not careful. I watched all of the volt gauges and meters carefully. I kept my hands ready on the controls. I did not want to be taken off-guard by anything. We followed the paths predetermined by Macharius’s discovery. It reminded me of our first approach to Irongrad. It was just as tricky and we did not have time to take things slowly and carefully.

The formation rolled on, feeling its way forwards through the shifting terrain where the sign of the daemon-god was being written on the living flesh of the world. It was slow progress and it became all the slower when the heretics realised what was happening. Not all of them were wrapped up in their ritual summoning. The great batteries on the armoured skin of the

city opened fire. Swarms of flyers engaged our air-cover in battle. Within the city itself I had no doubt troops were being marshalled.

As we got closer to the city, following the channels of the infernal symbol surrounding the hive, the earth tremors became more intense and the air seemed to shimmer and pulse. Whirlpools of multi-coloured light swirled in the air. At first I thought it was some sort of heat haze. Rocks split and tanks were swallowed like men going down in jungle quicksand. That was not the worst of it.

Out of those swirling whirlpools creatures were starting to emerge. They were roughly humanoid in shape, but their outlines seemed to shimmer and shift as much as the whirlpools that spawned them. They were an odd shade of pink and they belched flame from numerous orifices that seemed to appear in their skin, like blowholes bubbling out of a mudpool. There was something awful just in their very appearance. At times they seemed as if they were not quite solid, not quite there, as insubstantial as a heat-haze or a fever dream. At other times they looked somehow more solid than a tank. They shimmered and were gone only to reappear a few strides away from where they had been. They opened mouths as wide as their entire bodies, revealing fangs the size of bayonets and roared challenges as they threw themselves at our fighting vehicles.

On hearing the panicked cries, Drake strode over to where the New Boy sat and glared through his scope. I was close enough to hear him mutter, ‘The horrors of which the codexes speak. The Architect of Fate is surely behind all this.’

I did not know then what he meant but it did not sound good.

He turned to look at Macharius. ‘It is worse than I feared. Lesser portals are already starting to open. This is blowback from the ritual. It will get far, far worse unless we stop it. This confirms all suspicions – the cult of the Angel of Fire is indeed a front for Tzeentch, the Changer of Ways.’

He sounded shaken. Macharius remained calm. ‘The Emperor’s enemies must be opposed,’ was all he said.

Even their mighty fists could not do much beating against armoured hulls, but they distracted panicked drivers who swerved into the lava streams. Sometimes they clambered atop stalled vehicles and ripped off hatches, then they could reach inside and pull out terrified men, biting them in two with those enormous fanged mouths that seemed to be centred right on their

stomachs. Sometimes I thought I heard them screaming, ‘All is fire, all is flux, all is change.’

It was not so much their power that frightened but the sorcery they represented and I thought that if more of the creatures were waiting in the city, our infantry was going to have a tough time of it when they poured out onto the streets.

Macharius gave the command to open fire with our lighter weapons. The shimmering figures burst asunder, sometimes splitting into smaller figures, very similar but coloured an obscene shade of blue. I half-feared that they would flow back together and reform but they did not, at least not the ones I saw. Of course, such a strategy was not without its perils. Sometimes crews would open up with their heavier guns. That destroyed the daemons all right but it often would take out our own vehicles along with them. Macharius snapped out clear, concise commands to stop doing it. He insisted we use only the light guns and he was obeyed.

Other creatures began to manifest. They looked something like upturned mushrooms, ambulatory and oddly humanoid; from their limbs and maws they spewed iridescent flame. They too shimmered and sometimes seemed to wink in and out of existence as though products of some wicked fever dream. They exploded when hit though and killed what they could and I was left in no doubt as to their reality.

We rolled on towards Irongrad. Armies of shimmering, daemonic entities waited for us. We surged forwards to engage and as we did, the guns on the walls opened up on us, and Vultures swooped down to attack.

Against ordinary infantry, the daemons would have been a threat but on the open plain we simply destroyed them. I wondered what the sorcerers within the city hoped to achieve and the answer came back to me: nothing. They did not need to achieve anything. They were slowing us down, making us waste ammunition, causing a few casualties, and overrunning a few vehicles. The sheer mass of them created confusion in our ranks and the cost to the heretics was nil. The daemons were simply by-products of the ritual being enacted. They demonstrated to the people of Irongrad, and to us, the power of the Angel of Fire. They hindered us when every moment might be precious.

We made for the gates of the city, crushing our inhuman opponents beneath our treads. Occasionally the Baneblade rocked as one of the

massive wall-guns came close to scoring a direct hit. Our own weapons pounded away at the fortifications now. One by one, a few of the guns were silenced. Many of our own Leman Russ had been destroyed and the fiery daemons hunted their crews. I cursed but there was nothing else I could do. Macharius kept up a steady calm stream of orders, talking into the comm-net, responding to new developments, holding the whole vast scheme of the battle in his mind as a chess-player can hold the positions of play on a board.

Somewhere in the distance our own Basilisks had opened fire, aiming at positions marked on maps or called in by field commanders. Great mushrooms of smoke and fire blossomed on the walls of Irongrad. We bounced through a crater filled with pink-skinned daemons, turning them to smoking sludge beneath our treads, bursting them like balloons filled with ectoplasmic pus. Some of our troops had already reached the main gates. Siege engineers deployed their demolition charges and lock overrides. Our tanks kept firing. Vultures strafed the walls while Valkyries deployed storm troopers to take critical positions then soared away, sending their twin-tailed shadows racing over the ground below. For once, things went with precision. I attribute it to the close presence of Macharius. In minutes we were within the walls of the city, driving down the core roads, heading for the cathedral. It was there the resistance really began.

The heretics had barricaded the streets. In places they had left lines of industrial haulers and shattered vehicles. Our heavy tanks pressed on, smashing through the wrecks and overrunning the infantry crouched behind them, reducing them to bloody smears on the plascrete paving. Our anti-personnel weapons strafed them. They stood their ground and died. I offered up a prayer to the Emperor and the tutelary spirit of the Baneblade in which we rode, and kept my eyes on the highway we broke beneath the treads of our vehicle.

In a monstrous armoured column we rode down the streets into the centre of the hive. As we progressed the feeling of imminence, of something dreadful being about to happen, became more intense. The nearer hab-blocks had an abandoned look, as if those who had dwelled within had fled, taking what they could carry with them. Here and there, the great trash-piles seemed to be spontaneously combusting. Sprinkler systems in the ceiling sent great storms of water raining down but it did not seem to help, only

turned to mist. Some of the hab-blocks blazed. It was as if the whole hive were starting to catch fire.

There were more heretics but it seemed as if they were falling back before us, torn between a desire to slow our advance and to be close to the place where their unholy god was going to manifest. Perhaps the deluded fools believed the Angel of Fire would save them, that somehow, when the Angel of Fire manifested itself they were all going to be transformed in its supernatural light. Hell, maybe they would be, what did I know?

I heard Drake grunt behind me. I avoided turning to look at him, but I could not ignore his muttering voice. ‘The power is spiking. What new horror is this?’

Looking out through the drive periscope I saw at once what he meant. The statues were coming to life. It sounds absurd when I say it now, but that is exactly what was happening. All of those fire-winged metal angels were starting to stretch and flex, like men waking from long sleep. I knew then that something truly unnatural was really happening in Irongrad. When statues come to life, stretch out clawed fingers and take to the air on wings of plasma fire, you know that natural law has been suspended. They soared above the burning buildings and seemed to draw strength from the blaze.

Judging from the screams echoing through the streets around me, I was not alone in my realisation. It looked like the citizens of Irongrad were starting to wake up to the truth of what the materialisation of their deity might bring. It was a miracle of sorts but it was a dark and unholy one. Statues should not come to life. They should remain decently posed and immobile. They should not twist and gesture. Most of all they should not sing. From all of the angels came a full-throated hymn of triumph, at once joyous and evil, strangely thrilling and terribly ominous. The sound did not seem loud within the hull of the Baneblade but the fact that it could be heard at all was troubling. We were supposed to be warded from the siren song of Chaos.

The living statues swooped over us, stretching out their hands and sending bolts of flame arcing down. They splattered off the side of the Baneblade. A strange aroma of brimstone and something else, not unpleasant but haunting and odd was detectable even within the tank. I assumed this must be an actual smell, working through the filters, not something supernatural.

‘We must hurry,’ said Drake. ‘The daemon-god is almost through. Its power is starting to manifest and reality is starting to warp under the force

of its power.’

‘How long?’ Macharius asked.

‘Less than an hour.’

Macharius kept speaking into the comm-net, giving calm, clipped, clear instructions. Barrages of fire hit the daemonic angels, bursting them asunder, revealing the terrible spirits of the warp that had animated them. These looked even less human than the horrors we had seen outside, more like those vast flatfish that swim in the seas of Jurasik, although these did not swim but fly. As they were revealed, hideous screeching screams mingled with the singing of that evil choir.

We kept moving towards the cathedral, knowing that something dreadful was waiting for us.

Ahead of us, I got a clear view of the street. A huge force of Imperial troops was engaged with a horde of the heretics. Tanks crushed groundcars beneath their treads as they advanced. Heavy bolter fire shredded hastily thrown-together barricades. Lascannon chopped through formations of defenders. Buildings burned, metal angels filled the sky. Ray-like screamers dived on our troops, seized them in their maws and lifted them skywards to drop them on the ground hundreds of metres below.

Macharius ordered me to the left and directed more troops into the fray with a series of swift commands.

We drove on through the city, crushing the resistance we found. It should have made me more confident but it did not. The fighting raged through the streets. Macharius commanded it all, ordering flanking actions through side streets, sending troops via overpass and viaduct to attack the enemy from the rear. Somehow he kept the whole vast picture of the battle in his head. He had no difficulty visualising the three-dimensional topography of a hive and using it to his advantage. He dispatched reinforcements where they were needed, directed feints and strikes at enemy positions, and kept the whole Imperial army moving towards its goal in the centre of the city. All the while the clock ticked down. If he felt any pressure knowing of impending doom, no sign showed on his face or in his voice.

A gigantic explosion erupted off to our right. It was potent enough to make the Baneblade shiver and the mighty structures of the hab-blocks rock. I heard Macharius say something about a gas-refinery going up. He sounded

confident. I had no idea whether this was part of his plan, something he had expected, something that he could use or whether he was merely living out the maxim that command must always seem calm and in charge. If that was the case, I have to say that no man ever did it better than he.

The streets blurred by. Explosions wracked the city. Buildings blazed, and the streets were filled with smoke and screaming people. In some places hab-towers had collapsed, partially blocking the road. In other places where there had been hab-blocks, there were merely blackened ruins. I guided the Baneblade around the rubble, kept us moving in the direction of the cathedral. All around was war and fire. It felt like the end of the world.

Massive pipes were evident everywhere. I remembered our escape from the cathedral and knew we were getting close. I could have told that from the increase in resistance. There were more heretics and more vehicles. A cohort of hastily repainted Leman Russ blocked our way. I just kept moving towards them. Our guns blazed, reducing them to so much slag, and the Baneblade pushed through the wreckage like a mastodon pushing through a herd of antelope.

We entered the great cleared area around the cathedral. The mighty structure towered over us, rising into a polluted sky kilometres above. I felt certain that somewhere up there, high atop the unholy site, that gigantic starscraper-sized statue was slowly coming to life, stretching its limbs like a giant waking from sleep, and surveying the entire world with burning, hungry eyes.

The whole vast space was filled with heretics. They lurked behind hastily improvised fortifications, blasting away at us with their weapons. Our formation deployed around us, forming up and advancing, a monstrous armoured column that could not be resisted by any human force. Overhead fire-winged metal angels swooped and dived, sending bolts of magical fire down upon us. Fire from our tanks scythed through them and split their metal bodies and revealed the screaming daemons within. Among the heretics more of those pink-fleshed horrors shimmered and bellowed. Oddly fungal flamers hopped over the battlefield, spraying our forces with daemonic fire. Through every entrance into the great open space which surrounded the cathedral, Imperial armour poured. It was astonishingly well-coordinated. Battle tanks crushed anything made of flesh that got in their way. Great lascannon beams scythed across the plaza. Tens of

thousands of infantrymen began to disembark from Chimeras. The combat became close and deadly. Banners of a dozen regiments fluttered proudly above the fray. The grey tower on a white background showed the Legions of Asterion were there along with the Red Sword of the Ninth Traskian Hussars.

We moved forwards, grinding resistance beneath our tracks, surging up the enormous marble stairs of the cathedral until we confronted the cyclopean brass doors.

Pulping flesh as we went, we stormed closer. A concentrated barrage of fire buckled the doors, our Baneblade smashed through them like a battering ram and we were within, moving through the enormous vestibule, confronting heretics and steel angels. We drove onwards crushing the resistance until we had gone as far as we could go. Our tanks could move no further; not even a Baneblade could smash the enormous stone and ceramite walls and columns.

Macharius barked another order. A blaze of anti-personnel fire cleared the area around us. We were surrounded by broken bodies and ruined, religious finery. Smouldering banners covered the walls. The temple drapes provided shrouds for corpses.

‘Everybody out,’ Macharius ordered. ‘We go on foot from here.’

It sounded insane but we had no other choice. If we were going to confront the evil at the heart of this we were going to have to do it on foot.

OceanofPDF.com

Document under seal. Extract From the Decrypted Personal Files of Inquisitor Hyronimus Drake.
Possible evidence of duplicity on the part of former High Inquisitor Drake.
Cross-reference to Exhibit 107D-21H (Report to High Inquisitor Toll).

It is far, far worse even than I had thought it was going to be. The forces of the Architect of Fate have manifested themselves on the surface of this world. The thin skin of mortal reality has broken and that which lurks beneath has become visible. I am making these notes in what may prove to be the final moments of my life in the hope that they may be found and benefit the Imperial force that comes after us.

Across the city, our forces are engaged with the forces of the heretics. I can see it play out on the huge battlemap that Macharius studies. In my mind's eye I can picture the proud defenders of humanity surging into battle with hordes of heretics and swarms of manifest daemons, all the hungry horrors that serve the Changer of Ways. On a thousand streets, hundreds of thousands of men are locked in combat with the forces of evil. Thousands of Leman Russes and Chimeras and Manticores roar along roadways and across bridges, seizing the main transport arteries and pushing on deeper into the city. From what I overhear on the comm-net, tens of thousands are dying and far, far more are already dead.

Our greatest advantage is that our enemies appear to be confused and fighting piecemeal. They are everywhere across the city but their leaders are more concerned with their ritual than fighting a war. Macharius commands clearly and calmly and will win against the lesser forces, but that

will avail us nothing unless we get to the cathedral and prevent the manifestation of what I fear will be an avatar of one of humanity's greatest foes.

The awful truth is that we are not really being opposed. It is an illusion. All we are seeing is a side-effect of the Angel of Fire entering this world, and the token resistance of those worshippers who are in our way. It is not organised. Those who could have done that are busy elsewhere, masterminding the appearance of a daemon-god, abasing themselves before something dark and strange that they believe is coming to aid them, but which in reality is merely using them for its own purposes.

The skies swirl with daemons but that is nothing to what only a psyker can perceive. The sky above the hive is splitting. A great fissure in reality is opening. Something dark and terrible and majestic is moving through. I pray that we are in time.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

We piled out of the hatches and swarmed down the sides of the Baneblade. Even that enormous, ancient presence seemed dwarfed by the cathedral.

The air smelled of brimstone and incense and a scent I remembered well from the factorum-foundries of my youth: molten metal. A strange light glowed around everything. Our surroundings looked too bright, but sometimes shadows that should not have been there rippled across walls, as if cast by something huge moving against a light which had no source in our world. It was eerie, unnatural and disturbing. Sometimes the shadow of the horrors was visible as if they were just about to manifest.

Over everything was an oppressive sense of the imminence of something supernatural. I felt like I was in the presence of something greater than human, much greater. I was reminded of the moment when I had confronted the Titan in the rubble of the factorum but this was a thousand times worse. The ancient warmachine had been a being compared to which I was an insect. To the thing manifesting itself now, I was a microbe.

For a brief moment, I understood why the heretics were doing this and why they were so filled with worshipful awe. How many men can say they have been in the presence of a living god? Blasphemous as it sounds, the only comparable situation I can imagine is to stand before the Tomb Throne of the Emperor on galaxy-distant Terra and gaze upon the immortal being within.

For better or worse, I can say I have stood in the presence of the divine. It

was evil but it was wonderful and terrible too; the sort of experience a man might only be vouchsafed once in a lifetime and then only after a long and arduous pilgrimage.

It did not take the heretics long to recover. They came at us from many of the arched entrances to the great vestibule. Macharius ordered us to hold the line. More and more of our own troops flooded in through the broken gates and soon the hall was filled with a vast swirling conflict. We had the advantage in that we had our vehicles for cover and their anti-personnel weapons cut down the incoming heretics. Of course, sometimes it went wrong and our own men were scythed into death as well. In the Imperial Guard such things are inevitable and accepted.

Ivan and Anton crouched down beside me. ‘What are we waiting for?’ Anton asked. ‘I thought every second was vital.’

‘Ask them, not me,’ I said pointing to Macharius and Drake. The general was surrounded by his personal bodyguard of elite troops. More men and women in the robes of the Inquisition came to join Drake. I was surprised to see other people as well. The high inquisitor talked to them as if they were more than common soldiers. Some of them were garbed as privates, some as officers and some wore the clothes of local civilians. Anna was with them, garbed in some sort of greyish battle-armour that fitted her like a second skin.

I understood what was happening now. These were Drake’s agents concealed within the body of our army and the local population. If I had needed any proof of how desperate things were, this would have been it. All of these agents were hidden in place, spies among the people of the planet and our own army, reporting directly to Drake.

‘Who are they?’ Anton asked.

‘They are spies, Drake’s agents,’ I told him.

‘Psykers?’ he asked.

‘I guess.’

‘There’s a bloody lot of them,’ he said and shuddered and I knew then what he was thinking. They had been there all the time, walking among us, unknown and undetected, agents of the Inquisition, armed with supernatural powers. It was not a reassuring thought, even if they were, at a time like this, on our side. More and more warriors and psykers assembled around us.

Drake was surrounded by his own bodyguard now. They seemed to appear

out of nowhere but obviously had arrived with the main body of our troops. They were hard, competent-looking men in heavy carapace armour I associated with shock troops and storm troopers. They did not have the insignia of any regiment I knew though which was ominous enough. They were armed with lasguns bigger and heavier than ours. They glanced warily about, looking for threats. Somehow they managed to interpose themselves between Drake and his surroundings without ever appearing to. One of them saw me looking and glared at me hard. I smiled at him just to be annoying. Beyond him I could see Anna talking with Drake. The inquisitor looked distracted. She looked as calm as she ever did.

Macharius clambered onto the side of our Baneblade, and looking at him I remembered the speech he had given what seemed like so long ago when we had first arrived on Karsk and thought about how much had changed since then. There was a light about him now it seemed. It might have just been a trick of the light or some eddy current of the strange sorceries that were being woven around us, but he looked like something greater than human.

This time there was no technical engine of the Adeptus Mechanicus to amplify his voice and form. This time there was just him. He stood there, chainsword raised in his fist, and he addressed us. He had that trick of being able to speak as powerfully as a great actor filling an amphitheatre even with his own voice.

‘This is the hour,’ he said. ‘The forces of evil and heresy threaten to engulf this world. We will not let them!

‘We will show these daemon worshippers how men can fight and if need be how men can die!’

His voice had a rasping metallic ring to it now. Every man there strained to hear.

‘Above us, false men seek to summon a false god! They have been deluded by their own evil and their own lies. If they succeed, they will bring only darkness and inevitable retribution and death to all who dwell here. We shall not let them succeed. We shall climb into the very heavens if need be and tear down their false idol and overthrow the dark thing they worship and we shall bring the light of the Emperor’s Truth to this benighted world.’

He believed every word of it and in that moment so did we. We felt the

righteousness of our cause and the necessity of our victory.

‘Onwards, men! For the Emperor. Smite the heretic! Follow me. To victory!’

There was nothing else for it but to follow him into the depths of the cathedral. We would have followed him then if he was leading us towards the depths of hell. It was just as well really, for that was exactly where we were going.

Step by weary step we fought our way upwards. Rivers of blood flowed down the stairs, turning them into crimson waterfalls. Burned meat and ruined flesh formed barricades built of corpses.

The heretics opposed our every footfall. They died in their thousands, throwing themselves in our way, being burned down by las-fire or blown asunder by frag grenades. They took their toll on our men, killing almost as many as they lost. More and more of our lads flooded in behind us. I could only pray that enough of them had made it to the city to keep the flow of reinforcements coming.

The air shimmered and one of those rainbow whirlpools appeared. Out of it erupted a horde of the pink-skinned horrors we had encountered earlier, blasting flame out of their enormous fanged mouths, tearing men asunder with long, clawed fingers. The psykers around Drake responded with a surge of power and the vortex swirled shut. The daemons became marginally less stable-looking, one or two of them seemed to turn sideways on and vanish. The rest we swarmed into, shooting and stabbing. The storm troopers around Drake blasted with those heavy guns of theirs. A Horror bounded right up to me and opened its mouth to incinerate me. I stuck the shotgun in and pulled the trigger. Its rubbery flesh seemed to resist the shot. It expanded like a balloon for a moment under the force of the shot and only once it had become almost half again the size it had been did it burst. I half-expected it to explode but it did not. It mostly vanished leaving only traces of slime and a foul smell and a hail of shotgun pellets falling suddenly to earth.

Macharius swept past me along with Anton and Ivan and a group of square-jawed troopers. I raced to catch up and dived once more into the maelstrom of battle.

I was glad that there were no priests facing us. Then I thought about where

they must be and what they were doing and my gladness gave way to fear.

The temperature was rising. My throat felt parched. My skin felt as if it might crack. It was a by-product of the evil magic swirling around us.

One of the psykers blasted a swathe of heretics aside with some sort of mystical bolt. Drake shouted, ‘Save your strength! We shall have better use of it soon!’

The psyker nodded abashed. It was the last help of that sort we saw. It was all down to the main strength of the Imperial Guard now.

Macharius led us, speaking calmly, exhorting us to greater efforts, blasting with his bolt pistol and slashing any enemy who got within reach with his chainsword. He was worth a company of men alone just for his physical prowess. The inspiration the sight of him brought was worth much more.

Striding towards a manifesting daemon, he looked certain of his righteousness and utterly confident of victory. He moved through the combat as if nothing could touch him, and nothing did. I have often wondered if Drake wove some sort of spell around him that day to prevent heretic fire from harming him. It seems like the only explanation to me. I have never seen any man walk as boldly across a battlefield. Macharius marched as if he believed he was invincible and we followed him as if he was.

Under his Lion banner and the banners of our regiments we fought and died. Metre by bloody metre, step by bloody step we made our way up the inlaid marble steps into the heart of the cathedral and the horror waiting for us there.

Ahead of us I could hear what sounded like a choir of possessed angels. The hymn was beautiful, haunting and terrifying. The words echoed inside my skull, singing the praises of the Angel of Fire, telling of his glories and the way he would reward his worshippers and punish those who opposed him. It should have sounded like an evil parody of Imperial liturgy but it did not. It sounded as if the singers believed utterly in the truth of the words, which I suppose they did.

It was all in dire contrast to the bloody work we were doing as we fought our way into the inner sanctum. It was in a space so packed with bodies that we were reduced to hand-to-hand fighting. The heretics fought with all the fanaticism of zealots defending sacred soil. We smashed them down in the

name of Macharius and the Emperor.

The Sons of the Flame fought us every metre of the way. I clubbed one down with the butt of my shotgun, cleared another few packed metres of space by pulling the trigger and sending some more heretics to hell. Macharius chopped down more with his chainsword.

And then we were within the sanctum itself. It had been repaired from our previous visitation but not completely. Scorch marks covered the walls and floors. The lectern was still there though, as was that massive statue of the Angel in all its glory but it was no longer the focus of attention.

Ahead of us were massed ranks of priests chanting and singing their awful hymn. In front of them stood their High Priest, the focus of the whole devilish ritual. It was not he who commanded our sight though. It was the Angel. It had already manifested under the vast vaulted roof. The hanging banners already smoked and burned in contact with its burning wings. Around it everything seemed to shimmer.

It towered above us, seemingly a hundred times the height of a man. It looked bigger, as if something infinite were compressing itself into the tiny space available in our world. It came from somewhere else where its size had no limit or meaning. In my mind I imagined it larger than a planet, able to hold a whole world in its beautiful clawed hand. Its skin was the colour of bronze. Its robe was shimmering white. Its face was beautiful. Its eyes were filled with fire. Its wings billowed from its back in a cloud of gaseous plasma. It seemed immense but not yet solid. All of the flames in the temple twisted towards it, dancing worshippers genuflecting to their god.

It looked down on us and it smiled.

I felt as if it was looking directly at me. I am sure every man there did. It is a discomforting thing to come under the gaze of a great daemon. It was looking into my soul, seeing my darkest secrets, measuring every particle of sin. It knew me in a moment better than I knew myself. It knew all the dark and hateful things I wanted to keep hidden even from myself. It recognised me as one of its own. It made a beckoning gesture with its hand. There was an awful invitation in the movement. It called upon me to step forwards, to join it, to be purged by its cleansing flame and renewed.

There was a promise of immortality in that gesture and the fulfilment of all my dreams. I could walk forwards and join the ranks of its followers and become one with the immortals. I could welcome the presence of this

tremendous cosmic being into my life and become part of its legion of worshippers and leave this place and conquer worlds in its name.

Visions of an eternity of splendour danced before me. I would be ruler of a world, many worlds. My enemies would fear me. Women would adore me. I would be greater than any king. I watched transfixed. I think it was curiosity that saved my soul, strange as that may sound.

For some reason I looked at Macharius, perhaps even then seeking to follow his lead. He stood transfixed. His eyes were locked on the daemonic Angel. There seemed to be some sort of direct communication going on between them. I wondered what he was seeing, what temptations were being placed before him. I was being presented to myself as a conqueror of worlds. He was already all of that and more.

What could it offer him?

I can only guess. It does not take a great deal of imagination to think of what devil's bargain it offered. There is only one thing great enough for a man like Macharius to imagine seizing, only one throne worth taking possession of. I think the magnitude of the daemon's offer was immense; the throne of all the worlds located on distant Terra.

It was possible I suppose. Imperial armies have been corrupted in the past. Imperial generals, aye and beings greater than Imperial generals, have fallen to the temptations of Chaos. Backed by the power of the daemon-gods, they have conquered huge swathes of the galaxy, temporarily it is true, but nonetheless they have conquered.

I think this is what was offered to Macharius. And if you want the truth, I think he considered it. What man would not? Offered the galaxy, anyone might pause and think. Though I might be purged by the Inquisition as a heretic for saying it, I know I would have.

Macharius looked grim. He frowned. His eyes narrowed. I looked at the heretics. If anything supports my theory of the temptation of Macharius, it is that they did not attack us. By all rights they should have. They should have struck us down as we looked in awe on their daemon-god. They did not.

I think the Angel sent them some subtle message that they should wait. It must have felt there was a real chance of winning Macharius and the rest of us to its side. That would have been a prize for it, a great Imperial commander and all his armies. It must have deemed it worth the risk.

I wondered then, as I still do now, at this temptation of Macharius. Was it possible that this entire conflict, the destiny of this entire world was merely one small link in a chain of circumstance that would bring Macharius to this spot, to open him up to this temptation?

Could a daemon really have such subtlety and foresight?

Or was this simply an aberration of chance, a moment when the destiny of two great beings became intertwined because of an accident? I do not know the answer. The only beings who truly do are not telling.

We stood enthralled, awaiting the outcome, while the Angel of Fire watched us with burning eyes.

OceanofPDF.com

Document under seal. Extract From the Decrypted Personal Files of Inquisitor Hyronimus Drake.
Possible evidence of duplicity on the part of former High Inquisitor Drake.
Cross-reference to Exhibit 107D-21H (Report to High Inquisitor Toll).

And so it came to pass that I found myself within the sanctum of the most unholy Angel of Fire. Surrounded as I was by storm troopers sworn to protect me, standing at the heart of an army of the Imperial Guard, I knew there was no safety. I sensed the vast web of incalculable power being spun out of the netherspaces of the warp, all focused on the massive apparition that loomed in front of me. I was given a sense of quite how small I was and quite how great evil can be.

It was a titanic dazzling thing, feeding on the deaths of its worshippers, drawing strength from the rituals being performed all across the city. The cathedral itself was a focal point for these, and I understood, for the first time, that all of those cages had been placed according to a very precise pattern, aligned in such a way that they would channel energy to this place at this time. In my mind's eye, I seemed to be looking down on the city, my spirit soaring clear and able to comprehend the sheer awesome scale of the massive ritual. For some reason, the attention of the daemonic entity was focused on Macharius. I sensed that perhaps it wished to recruit him, to make him its servant. If truly he was the one for whom we wait, he would make a true and terrible vessel for it. I knew that this could not be allowed. There could be no more terrible threat to the Imperium than such a one as Macharius possessed by such a thing as this.

I was at the centre of a smaller pattern, made up of the brave men and women, psykers all, who had been assembled in a final valiant attempt to forestall the ritual. I felt every last one of them through the link we shared, all of the sanctioned psykers of all of the Guard regiments, all of my agents who had been dispersed throughout the massive army. Only a few of them were present with me. Others were scattered through the cathedral, part of the fighting regiments within. All of them, at that moment, stood frozen, all of them lent me their strength.

I looked at the focus of that hellish ritual and I drew on what strength I could. We did not have even a fraction of the power that was needed to overcome that vast ingathering of cosmic filth. Such was not my intention. I needed to disrupt that lattice of force and the whole thing would spin out of control, like a mechanical engine when sand has been thrown into its workings.

It was the only chance I had. I summoned all my strength and threw a bolt of titanic psychic energy at the focal point of the ritual.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Macharius looked upon the daemon. The daemon gazed back. My glance flickered from one to the other. Drake moved up beside Macharius. Sweat rolled down his brow. Tears of blood dripped from his eyes. He seemed caught up in some invisible spiritual struggle beyond my understanding. All around people were screaming and vomiting and tearing at their own eyes with their nails as if trying to gouge them from their sockets. There was no pattern to it, save that they all seemed to be people who had come with him. Among the Guard I saw men in the uniforms of sanctioned psykers doing the same.

Even the inquisitor's mighty will was not up to breaking the daemon's spell. Macharius stood silently, seeing whatever vision the daemon had put in his mind, wrestling with whatever gigantic temptations it offered him.

All of our men were rapt in a mystical trance, just as much as the heretics who had summoned the daemon. Men knelt weeping, some caught fire and turned to ash and fell leaving only outlines of dust on the ground. Some howled the praises of the Angel and abased themselves grovelling. Blood streamed from the nostrils of the righteous and unrighteous alike. It was not just our men who were falling and burning. The same thing was happening among the Sons of the Flame.

I knew that I stood at the centre of some great swirl of events, that the consequences of what happened here would ripple out through the sector and eventually the galaxy, that worlds would live and worlds would burn in

consequence of it.

Macharius looked up at the daemon. ‘I refuse you!’ he said.

As if taking strength from that, Drake spoke the words of a great prayer, invoking the name of the Emperor. There was a ripping, tearing sensation inside my head, as if the wave of power he had unleashed was so strong that even I could sense it. As suddenly as it had come over us the daemonic spell was lifted. We were purged of the influence of the unclean.

I raised my shotgun to my shoulder, took careful aim and fired at the High Priest. The sound of the shot was shockingly loud in the ominous silence. The chief heretic’s head exploded in a cloud of blood and brains. In that moment, all hell broke loose.

The swirling essence of the daemon descended upon the corpse of the High Priest. The body slowly rose, one eye dangling from an optic nerve torn from its exposed skull. The other was filled with fire. Great flaming wings emerged from his back, a sword of fire appeared in his hands. His ruined corpse had become the vessel of the Angel. Some of the sense of terrible presence was gone.

‘It has not fully manifested,’ Drake shouted. ‘It cannot draw on its full power. We can still overcome it.’

I was not sure I believed him.

The corpse advanced towards us. The flesh of the right cheek had been ripped away to expose grinning teeth. It looked evil and terrible and filled with awful wrath. Macharius raced to meet it, chainsword screaming in his hand. The daemon parried the blow with its weapon. It seemed impossible something so insubstantial could parry a weapon as solid as a chainsword but it did. It struck back, blade flickering forwards impossibly fast, a line of fire searing Macharius’s cheek.

Drake and his psykers started to chant then. A glow surrounded Macharius, of the sort you see depicted in religious paintings of the Emperor and his primarchs. It was the first time I had ever seen it in reality. I swear a halo of light had appeared around Macharius’s head. He looked like a saint made flesh, which was in its way reassuring; to survive this we were going to need the assistance of a saint and more even than that.

Macharius fought with the Angel of Fire. I thought I heard something over the roar of battle and the chant of plainsong. I realised it was Drake. He was shouting: ‘Kill the priests!’

We waded in among the heretics, stabbing and bludgeoning and shooting. I have never considered it honourable to murder unarmed men but in this case I was prepared to make an exception. The priests screamed and died. The air where the Angel had been swirled; looking up I saw what appeared to be a hole in the fabric of our reality, a gateway to somewhere else, to whatever distant, Chaotic realm the Angel had come from.

All I seemed to see were swirling colours, flames dancing in all manner of strange patterns and bearing a resemblance to whatever real-world objects my mind projected on to them. They took on shape, like those castles you sometimes see when staring into a fire. I saw molten landscapes over which rose citadels sculpted from flame and around which fluttered hosts of fire-winged angels. They were assembling themselves into disciplined regiments and preparing to jump the gap to our world.

I tore my gaze away from that portal into an alternative reality and I saw that Macharius was still engaged in hand-to-hand combat with the avatar of the Angel of Fire. As ever, he moved with blazing quickness. His motion was a blur, too fast to be followed easily with the human eye. It did not appear as if the daemon had any trouble doing so.

The Angel parried Macharius's blade with its sword of fire. If anything, its attacks were even faster than the general's. I was surprised that anything could live when faced by the full fury of its onslaught. Every time that fiery blade licked out it seemed to impact upon the general's armour. And yet, Macharius did not burn. It took me some time to realise why. He was being protected by the power of our own psykers.

As ever, Macharius had a very sound grasp of the situation. Of course, in all likelihood, he knew no more about how to deal with it than I did. On the other hand, he knew that there was someone present who did.

'Close that infernal portal before it is too late.' Drake heard and obeyed.

Lines of light began to emerge from all of the Imperial psykers and converge upon the stalwart figure of the inquisitor. He did something with all that power, channelling it into a mesh of potent energy that swirled outwards from his hands and surrounded the glowing gate. He began to pull the net tight. The opening started to close but not without resistance.

Men screamed and I wondered what was happening because there was a note in the screams that I had never heard before. The psykers around Drake started to fall, their mouths open, their faces pale, blood gushing

from mouths and nostrils and eye-sockets. It was not the same sound as the heretics made as they were slaughtered, it was something else, the sound of men who were losing their very souls, having them drawn from their bodies and offered up as a sacrifice to something greater.

Beams of light emerged from Drake's hand and surged around the gateway, forming a lattice around it. His whole body was lit by the energies he wielded. His eyes blazed with the Emperor's Light. Every one of the people who still communed with Drake stood frozen. Their eyes were wide, their mouths stretched in ghastly rictuses as if screams were being torn from their very souls. One by one, they toppled and died as if their life force was being wrenched from them and used to power whatever exorcism Drake performed.

The daemon began to oppose the inquisitor's efforts and tried to get past Macharius in order to cut him down with its fiery blade. Macharius kept himself interposed. He stood between it and Drake. Seeing the Lord High Commander at risk, more and more of our soldiers pressed forwards. The Angel chopped down but it could not find a way through that wall of flesh that opposed it. What human courage and human muscle could achieve our soldiers did. They wanted to protect Macharius even at the cost of their own lives. They threw themselves forwards, again and again forming a rampart of blood and gristle. I saw Anton and Ivan struggle to get forwards. They were almost within striking distance of the Angel when I lost sight of them in the press.

I sensed the change in the atmosphere around us. Where once there was a wind of power blowing outwards into our world, now it felt as if the current was flowing in a different direction. All of the fire and energy seemed to be being sucked out of the air around us and returned to the place from which it had come, and as it did so I could see that the Angel of Fire was being drawn back into its own fiery realm. It fought every step of the way but, at last, it passed through the portal and that eerie gateway swirled shut.

And then suddenly, it was silent. The Angel of Fire was gone. The portal was closed, leaving only a strange shimmering in the air that vanished even as we watched. Drake stood surrounded by bodies. In the ultimate crisis his bodyguard of psykers had laid down their lives and more to protect him and to close the way through which the daemon had come. The high inquisitor looked wearier than any man I had ever seen. His shoulders slumped, his

eyes were half-closed, he had aged a couple of decades in as many minutes. Macharius walked over to him and said something, I have no idea what.

I looked around to see what had become of my friends. Ivan lay on the ground clutching at his arm. Half his face seemed to have melted and I could tell from the set of his eyes that he was in pain. Anton knelt beside him, offering him liquor from a flask. The New Boy stood guard over them both, his lasgun held tight in his white-knuckled hands. The Understudy was beside him. His expression was as blank as ever. The titanic events we had just witnessed did not seem to have left a mark on his psyche.

My eyes kept tracking round looking for danger. There did not seem to be any. Few heretics remained and those that did seemed to have lost all will to fight. More and more of our troops entered the sanctum. Their faces wore a relieved expression as if they understood the fate we had so narrowly avoided.

I strode over to Anton and Ivan. ‘How is it going?’

‘We’re alive,’ Anton said.

Ivan just gurgled in pain. He looked up at me as if he desperately wanted to say something. I leaned in to hear what it was he had to say.

‘What is it?’ I said.

‘Tell that bastard Anton that if he does not stop standing on my hand, I will cut his nadgers off!’

Looking down I could see that one of Anton’s heavy boots was indeed on Ivan’s fleshly hand. I pushed him off. At this point the Guardsmen present started chanting Macharius’s name. It started slowly and softly at first, but it grew louder and it was taken up by all of the Guard present, the word rolling like thunder down the stairwell and echoing through the cathedral. It seemed as if the chant was taken up by the entire army. The stones themselves vibrated to the name and it seemed as if the word would echo out from the world of Karsk and across the galaxy.

I suppose it did. The High Commander’s name became a battle-cry that would ring out down the years and across thousands of worlds. He would change the destiny of our sector and the Imperium and I suppose it all started there. If I close my eyes, I can still picture the scene so clearly, and hear the word echo through my bones like a prophecy of triumph and doom: ‘Macharius. Macharius! MACHARIUS!’

OceanofPDF.com

Document under seal. Extract From the Decrypted Personal Files of Inquisitor Hyronimus Drake.
Possible evidence of duplicity on the part of former High Inquisitor Drake.
Cross-reference to Exhibit 107D-21H (Report to High Inquisit.or Toll).

On the day after his confrontation with the Angel of Fire I stood with Macharius on the platform in the great crematorium in the southern sector of Irongrad. He looked down on the huge conveyor belt. Tens of thousands of bodies lay on it, all of them in the uniform of the Imperial Guard. The motivating engines were silent. The belts were not moving. Macharius looked down on those endless ranks of the dead as if trying to memorise them. I asked him why he had summoned me. He thanked me for my aid against the Angel of Fire and asked me what I was going to say in my report to my superiors.

I could tell what was on his mind. We had stood in the presence of a great cosmic evil. Men have been killed for less. Entire armies and worlds have, for fear that they might be tainted and turned against the Imperium. Macharius was wondering what I was going to say, whether his armies would be destroyed and he would be assassinated in his sleep or put to death by some other arm of the Imperium.

What could I tell him? He had been tested and he had not been found wanting. Perhaps he was the one we had been waiting for, for so long. Perhaps that is why the Angel wanted him as well. He would have made just as terrifying a tool of the powers of darkness as he was a champion of the Imperium.

We looked at each other. He had his hand on his weapon. I knew then that he was considering killing me if I gave him the wrong answer. I smiled and told him that killing me would not make any difference. The Imperium has other agents. I am merely one among legion. I told him I meant him no harm, that I would report that I had encountered a manifestation of Chaos and dealt with it. He asked me why.

I lied, of course. I could not tell him the real reason a faction of the Inquisition wanted him alive, just as several factions wished him dead. I told him it was because the Imperium needed him, that it must be reunited, that gigantic challenges awaited us in the new millennium and that the realm of mankind needed to be strong to face them. It played to his vanity. I could tell that at least part of him believed while the deeper and more subtle part of his mind sought the truth. There was nothing else to tell him so I asked him why he was here in the crematorium, what he hoped to achieve.

He told me of some ancient kings of Terra. They had a tradition that after a battle they would ride across the battlefield and look upon the faces of the dead who were there because of their will. In this way they understood the cost of their statecraft and what obedience to their orders truly meant. He told me that every one of those men down there on those conveyor belts was there because he had been following his orders, then he pulled the great lever that started the engines. The great gates of the crematorium furnaces opened in a blast of heat and the long lines of bodies rolled into the flames.

Macharius was still watching them when I departed hours later. I heard he remained there for a day and a night and still the bodies burned.

OceanofPDF.com

FIST OF DEMETRIUS

OceanofPDF.com

Exhibit 509-H. Extract from transcript from xenos artefact recovered on Procrastes 4. Warning – this translation is heretical and spiritually contaminated. Access partially de-restricted as part of ongoing investigation into possible beatification of Lord High Commander Solar Macharius and related trial of former High Inquisitor Heironymous Drake for heresy and treason against the Imperium.

These records will be interpolated with the testimony of former sergeant Leo Lemuel (missing, presumed deceased) to provide a partial narrative of the Procrastes campaign and the events surrounding it.

OceanofPDF.com

PROLOGUE

I bathe in the sound of their screams. Their pain renews me. The scent of their fear fills me with joy. Such pitiful things they are. I had hoped, against my better judgement, for the smallest of challenges, something to drive away ennui for this brief moment of eternity, but what I got were mewling animals, barely fit to sully my blades with their blood.

I stand here, surveying the field of battle from atop a mountain of corpses. I would think it a waste of valuable slaves, save for the fact that there are plenty more humans where these came from. They breed like vermin, filling the universe that was once ours with their squalling progeny. It is good to teach them their place once again.

One of the humans raises its crude weapon and points it at me. The creature is so slow. I spring to one side and the las-bolt strikes the corpse on which I had stood. Flesh sears. A stomach bloated with charnel gases explodes.

It matters not to me. I am nowhere near any more.

I see fear written on the human’s clay-made, brute features. There is no appreciation of the beauty of my movements. It does not have any sense of how blessed it is, to be killed by my hand, to give up its life to feed me.

I leap, crossing thirty strides in a suspensor-assisted bound, and land beside it. My blade flickers. It looks at me dumbfounded. It has not felt anything yet. It looks down and sees that its coarsely woven tunic has fallen apart where my blade cut. It looks relieved for a second, in its last few

painless moments of life, then it sees the blood starting to leak from its flesh. It wonders what has happened. It has no concept of how to kill with artistry or die with dignity.

I smile and move my blade again. Delicate as a haemonculus's scalpel is my movement. I peel back the flesh like the cloth of the tunic. Muscle is revealed, then vein, then the white, white glimmer of bone. The human's mouth goes as wide as its eyes. It gurgles then clamps shut its lips, trying to hold in its whining.

I am careful not to break anything, to sever anything. It has all happened too quickly for the human. Its sluggish nervous system is just starting to register the first glimmerings of true agony. I feel myself flush with a small jolt of pleasure. Its mouth opens again, a fish out of water, drowning in air. A faint trickle of saliva glistens on the corner of its lips, catching the wan sun's light like dewdrops on a leaf.

I pause for a moment to consider the loveliness of it, and as I do some of the creature's oafish companions blunder into view. Their faces are distorted with animal rage. They have interrupted me in my meditation, and I resolve to quench their anger with their blood and fan the flames of their fear until it is a sun-hot blaze.

I reach out with my free hand to caress the dying human's face with the razor-sharp fingers of my gauntlets. I insert a blade into an eye socket and listen to the scream. It is a simple pleasure but one I always enjoy.

The humans stand their ground. One of their leaders bellows orders. Its harsh speech offends my ears, so I draw my pistol and fire. My shot is not intended to kill, so it does not. It sears the tongue and stoppers the creature's offensive grunting, changing a bellow to a gabbling whimper. The humans continue their slow, slow movements, raising weapons to their firing positions.

I pick up the dying creature and twirl it like a partner in the Tarentina of Skulls until its body is in front of me. I make sure it has a moment to realise what is happening, to bring its one good eye to bear on the weapons of its comrades. Something wet squirts down its leg; whether blood or urine I do not care.

It stiffens, knowing what is happening. It faces a firing squad of its own companions. Its form partially obscures mine for all the moments I need. It screams, thinking it is going to be a barrier between me and its comrades. It

does not even have the wit to realise it is merely a distraction.

I leap as the dying human's skin sizzles under a storm of las-bolts. The greasy smell of frying flesh penetrates the nasal filters of my armour. I make a note to see that my artificer is suitably punished for its laxity before it dies. One thousand hours of screaming seems appropriate.

My leap carries me to the cornice of an ancient temple building above the squad of humans. They continue to fire, responding to the wails of their dying compatriot, cheering and grunting, somehow under the pathetic delusion that they are harming me. I take a second to look at their jester caperings. Overhead, the huge face carved into the side of the mountain looks down mockingly. I laugh, and the amplifiers in my armour project my mirth thunderously.

They look around, their bestial minds confused, lacking the wit even to look up. I could kill all of them in this moment. It would be simple. One grenade would do the trick, but where is the artistry in that?

There are twenty-seven of them, a figure divisible by three, which has always been a fortunate number for me. I decide to spare every third one of them, to let them survive to face the torturers. I will kill one-third of them cleanly, to give the survivors something to regret they did not receive, and I shall make one-third of them chorus their screams unto the heavens.

I spring among them, a carnivore among a herd of plant-eaters. For a moment I am amid the press of their bodies, surrounded by so-rippable flesh, looking upon meat puppets made to mock the shape of the eldar. I feel a delicious tingle of utter hatred. I stand stock-still for a moment to appreciate it before springing into action.

They still have not realised what has happened. I strike one down from behind, applying a careful measure of force so that the skull does not break. I snap another's neck. I punch blade fists into the stomach of one who turns, and pull out the ropes of entrails. They squirm like sticky purple serpents. I see the pulsing of the thing's heart within its chest cavity and I resist the urge to pull it out. That would be too quick. I loop a rope of intestines around the throat of another and pull tight. It is not intended to kill, merely to mock. I vault over the shoulder of the squirming soldier. My kick snaps the neck of another.

I handspring as they try to track me, panicked, squeezing the triggers of their weapons. Their clumsy crossfire burns each other. I send a razor's

edge flashing into the throat of one, then shoot another. I kill them before they can accidentally slay those I have chosen to let live. I do not wish them to spoil the symmetry of my creation.

I shoot and strike and lunge, killing one, sparing another, maiming a third. They are too slow to stop me. One of them at last realises it and draws a grenade. I see the delicious fear in its eyes and I know what it intends to do. It is so frightened that it thinks it is going to drop the grenade where it stands and die taking me with it.

The grenade begins its slow, slow fall to the ground. I snatch it from the air, grab the human by the head and force the bomb into the creature's mouth, then down its throat. I backflip away, suspensor-assisted, soaring into the air as its head and chest explode in a fountain of blood.

In the confusion, the humans have lost track of me again. I pick three at random and execute them with headshots. They mill around, leaderless now, knowing something is killing them but unable to strike back. They are a rabble, not even worthy of contempt.

Sudden boredom strikes me. I am tempted to end the game and simply kill them all, but that would be undisciplined. One must finish what one starts. One must keep to one's purposes. The true artist never loses sight of his goals, even though the agony is its own reward, as is the terror.

I catch the pheromonal trace of something new, a human scent that, surprisingly, does not speak of fear or horror, that carries an icy tang of calmness and control. I swivel my head, seeking its source.

A human in a long black coat advances on the rabble as they turn to flee. It looks cleaner, more austere and disciplined than the rest, which is like saying one mon-keigh looks less idiotic than another as it flings its excrement at the bars of its cage. It shouts instructions but is ignored by the panicked mob. It draws a pistol and executes one of the fleeing humans. I feel a faint flicker of annoyance. The newcomer threatens to disarrange the symmetry of my work. There is only one way to prevent that, which is to make it take the place of the man it has killed.

I drop to the ground in front of black-coat.

'Xenos scum,' it snarls, marginally quicker on the uptake than the others. 'Die!'

The translation engines give its voice a flat, metallic ring. It raises its pistol to shoot me as it did its fleeing species-mate. I enjoy the way it froths at the

mouth as it tries to bring its weapon to bear as I move. I am glad I decided to spare this one for later, because breaking its will and teaching it to worship me will be more amusing than simply killing it out of hand.

I reach out and snap its wrist before it can pull the trigger. I strike a nerve cluster that I long ago learned will immobilise a human, and then slap it unconscious with the sort of contempt I am sure it will understand when it comes to contemplate it. All around, the rest of its pack continues to flee. I pick them off, one by one as suits my purposes, taking a few extra moments to ensure that the corpses fall in a pattern that is pleasing to the eye, that the blood spatters are random but beautiful, and that there is more than a suggestion of intelligence at work amid the havoc.

I pause in contemplation at the centre of the artwork I have created. It has been a pleasant few minutes of relaxation, but now there is work to be done. I allow the communications channels to open again and listen to my followers as they go about their business.

It seems that they have encountered no more resistance than I have among the so-called defenders of this once sacred site. In a way, it saddens me. There are so few challenges left in the universe, so little of interest. I hear reports of captives being taken and that cheers me. Soon there will be feasting and gladiatorial contests and sport to be had with our new slaves. It is good.

This petty world is ours now. We have a secure base. Soon I will open the Gate of the Ancients and claim their lost treasures. I have taken the first step on my long road back to Commorragh and eventual triumph over my enemies.

Reports are coming in from all over this pathetic planet. The defences are every bit as poor as our scouts suggested they would be. Cities have fallen. Citadel towers are under our control. The population of most of this continent is subdued. We are masters of this valley now and will soon have access to its ancient secrets. The humans cannot stop us.

Of course, these valleys have some significance in their primitive faith. It is only natural. They are looking upon the work of their racial superiors, and no matter how weak our ancestors were, those eldar were still as far above humans in the great scheme of existence as a human is above a puke-lizard.

I push such thoughts to one side, unsure as to why I am even bothering to contemplate them. I confess there is something mildly disturbing about this place. The temples of our ancestors rise above us like the tombs of forgotten gods, which is, I suppose, what they are. I stride up the hill, acknowledging the respectful salutes of my warriors. Discipline is lax, a few have already begun to feast, flaying alive their still-living prey to consume the delicious agony. I make a note of the miscreants' names. I will see that some suitably subtle penalty is enforced later. They will get the message.

I stand in the shadow of the Temple of the Night-Dark One. I have come a long way to find sanctuary here, in a place where none of my enemies would think to look. My rivals are still back in Commorragh, enmeshed in their endless schemes. Can it be that I am really the only one who has read the ancient books of lore? It seems unlikely. I have learned to mistrust good fortune. Too often it is a smiling mask that covers the schemes of one's enemies. It is always wise to look closely when the universe offers you a gift. It proffers many a poisoned chalice in a form that looks like a victor's cup, as I have learned to my cost. The price of failure in the intrigues of Commorragh is very high.

I inspect the great entrance to the place. Above me stands an enigmatic stone giant. Its face is somewhat like mine, long and lean and beautiful, with pointed ears. Its shape is tall and slender compared to that of the disconsolate human corpses it looks down on.

I pass through the entrance and into the cool interior. This cave was once a spot sacred to my soft ancestors, back when they believed in their milksop gods. There are niches and alcoves with many small shrines where once offerings were left, flowers and incenses and such. I remove my helmet and make an offering of spittle on the face of a deservedly forgotten deity. A human, robed as one of their priestly caste, makes a shocked sound. My lieutenant, Sileria, digs her finger-blade into a nerve cluster and it screams.

'The forgotten ones have found new worshippers,' she says. She sounds amused.

'Deserving ones,' I say, and she laughs. There has always been an understanding of sorts between her and me. 'Mon-keigh who have no understanding of what they abase themselves before, who do not even know that the things they worship are themselves long dead, devoured by She Who Thirsts.'

‘I have secured the shrine as you commanded, Lord Ashterioth. No one has approached it, or will until you have inspected it yourself.’

She wears a questioning look. Clearly she is wondering why we are here and not pillaging the human cities of this world, taking slaves for the Dark Feast. I consider taking her into my confidence, but I am not suicidal. She might try to buy her way back into favour in Commorragh by betraying me to my rivals. She will learn what she needs to know when she needs to learn it. I wonder if she has sneaked into the inner sanctum herself to gaze at what we have come so far to find.

Of course she has, and she is confused because she has found nothing of value.

A beautiful creature, Sileria, but one lacking in both understanding and imagination. For her, if it does not glitter or scream it can have no value. She does not understand what else might be found in an ancient, empty shrine. I can see she is nerving herself to ask me a question, so I nod encouragingly.

‘Is it true that you intend to desecrate all of these shrines, my lord?’ She gives the word lord a faintly submissive erotic twist. I remember her writhing beneath my lash in bedchamber games of dominance and submission. Surely she is not so simple as to think I would let such memories influence me. But, of course, there is value to be had from encouraging her in such a false belief.

‘In a sense, Sileria,’ I say. In a sense it is true as well. If the ancient texts are to be trusted, I will be committing an act of desecration when the gate opens. I will take what the ancients built and twist it to my own purposes, which, most assuredly, were not theirs. She nods as though I have told her something significant; possibly it is something significant as far as her limited understanding is concerned. No matter how much she schemes, Sileria will always be a follower. Some are born to lead and others to follow, even among the Pinnacles of Creation.

‘I go within,’ I say. ‘Make sure I am undisturbed.’

I leave her absent-mindedly stroking the human with her blades. Its whimpers are a mixture of pleasure and horror and pain. She will keep her new pet alive for some time, I am sure. I turn my mind to higher things as I descend into the long darkness beneath the temple complex. I have a long way to go before I find what I am looking for.

It looks like nothing. Even I, who know its significance, cannot suppress a feeling of disappointment. This is what I have come all these long light years for? For this I have travelled through the webways, absented myself from the intrigues of Commorragh and lost my high place among the Exalted? This?

I stand in a large chamber, surrounded by defaced statues of extinct gods. Before me looms an archway large enough to fly a skimship through, except that it would be impossible. There is nowhere to go. The arch looks as if it is a carving emerging from the wall. It leads onto nothing but blank stone laced with shimmering crystal. Is it possible I have made a mistake, I wonder, that the ancient texts are wrong, that I have become the victim of some gigantic, cosmic hoax?

I look at the archway again. On it are carved the faces of the twelve forgotten gods to whom this temple-site was once sacred. Even if I could name them, I would not. She Who Thirsts expunged their weakness from the universe when she took them into herself. They do not deserve to be remembered by the strong. We do not need such deities now, certainly not such feeble ones. We have become like unto gods ourselves.

I strip off my gauntlet and touch the cool stone, feeling at those mask-like visages. I do not know what I am hoping for. There are no secret buttons or pressure plates to be depressed.

I run my fingers over the deep veins of crystal within the arch, hoping despite myself for some response, some glimmer of ancient archeotech to come to life beneath my touch. Nothing happens.

I glance around. For a moment, I have a sense of being watched. I wonder if it is one of my warriors, spying on me, hoping to learn something; Sileria perhaps. I see nothing, and my senses are keener than most. The sense of ancient, shrivelled presence remains. Perhaps the tattered wisps of the ghosts of dead gods still cling to this place.

The time has come, I tell myself. I walk to the altar and place my hands on the ancient psychotropic crystals. They tingle beneath my hands, still responding to the ancient power of the place. I invoke the rituals I learned in ancient books stolen from the forbidden library. I feel a faint shudder in the crystal as the old powers awaken. Lights flicker. The earth quivers as if it is a giant beast whose sleep has been disturbed by an old nightmare. I have started the first pebble of an avalanche that will eventually bring the

full geomantic potential of this place into focus and open the gateway. If all goes correctly, the seal will be broken and the ways beyond will become accessible within mere weeks.

There are rituals that I must still perform, powers that must be invoked, but I have begun. I am one step closer to achieving what I have planned all these long centuries.

I stand and contemplate the gateway arch, wondering whether I will really find the key to ultimate power beyond it. The texts hint as much. In this place, at this time, the ancients struggled to create a device that would be the ultimate weapon and the ultimate defence. The hints suggest that the Fall came before it could be tested but that they were close. If that is even only partially correct there is much I could do with their work.

I smile, alone with the ancient ghosts, thinking that for once I have stolen a march on my rivals. No one else knows of this place. No one will come here before the gateway opens.

If they do, I will destroy them. After I have taken my pleasure upon their broken bodies, of course, and taught them that there are worse things by far than the death they will beg for.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ONE

Exhibit 107D-5H. Transcription from a speech imprint found in the rubble of Bunker 207, Hamel's Tower, Kaladon, containing information pertaining to the proposed beatification of Lord High Commander Solar Macharius and to the investigation of former High Inquisitor Heironymous Drake for heresy and treason against the Imperium.

Walk in the Emperor's Light.

The huge warship rocked under the impact of a glancing hit from the planetary defence batteries. I could tell the *Lux Imperatoris* had only taken a glancing hit because I was still alive. The hull was still intact. My cold corpse was not floating in interplanetary space. For a moment, there was utter stillness, as if a quarter of a million men, the crew of the ship and all the Imperial Guard warriors it carried, held their breath.

Above me, through the armoured crystal dome of the warship's command chamber, I could see a world burning. Demetrius had been a globe of giant forests and ancient temples. Orbital strikes had set those forests on fire. As the wings of night swept over the visible face of the planetary orb, continents glowed fitfully. Occasionally the glittering contrail of a weapon blast leapt across my field of vision as the command ship added the fire of its own batteries to the assault. It had a terrible beauty to it.

Demetrius was not the first world I had seen burn in the ten years since I

had joined Macharius’s bodyguard, and I felt certain it would not be the last.

All around us huge holoscreens showed three-dimensional topographical representations of this sector of the galaxy, across which the gigantic war machine of the crusade rumbled. Beneath each holoscreen were tables on which scribes and tech-adepts moved representations of armies and fleets. I had no idea exactly what was going on, but then I did not need to possess such a thing. The man for whom I was a bodyguard already knew all of that and more.

The ten years since Karsk had not changed Macharius physically. He still looked like a warrior god. Some of the other generals were starting to show the signs of easy living and the spoils of victory on a galactic scale, but not him.

The juvenat treatments still worked better for him than any other man I have ever met. He quite literally did not look a day older than when I first saw him inspecting the troops before we began our assault on Irongrad. His hair was still golden, his figure was still lithe, his eyes still resembled those of some great predatory beast. But there was a hardness about his features that had not been there when I had first seen him, a grimness that had grown since his encounter with the daemon that waited at the heart of Karsk. He had seen something during that encounter that had transformed him into an even more relentless conqueror of worlds, made him more determined to reassert Imperial control over all the sectors lost to schism.

As he walked around the command centre he projected the same air of confidence that had been so striking when I first saw him. If anything, he seemed even more certain than he had back then, and he had every reason to.

For ten years the crusade had enjoyed almost uninterrupted victories. It had reclaimed hundreds of worlds, bringing them back into the Emperor’s Light and restoring the true faith to countless billions.

I doubt that I had changed much either. Since being inducted into Macharius’s personal guard I too had been given access to juvenat treatments, and they appeared to work pretty well for me. I did not feel any different from those early days on Karsk. The same was true for Anton, who stood nearby scanning all of the assembled personnel for any threats to the Lord High Commander. He still looked as tall and gawky as a fisher

bird in the deltas of the Great Black River. His green uniform with the lion's head insignia of Macharius's family hung on his body as loose as hand-me-downs on a scarecrow. The juvenat treatment had done nothing for the old scar on his forehead. It still writhed like a centipede whenever he frowned or squinted.

Ivan watched everything with a cynical glitter in the human eyes that peered out of his partially metallic face. His grin revealed sharp metal teeth, razor-edged. The juvenat treatments had not worked quite as well for him, possibly because his body was riddled with mechanical parts and this interfered with the technical magic of the serums. Of course, the quality of his augmetic systems was much higher now, as befitted one who was the guardian of the highest warlord in existence. They obviously did not cause him quite so much pain as the older versions had, and he did not drink quite as much as he used to, at least not when he was around Macharius.

We had come a very long way from our homes in the slums of the hive-world of Belial.

The Undertaker watched everything with his strange, empty glance. He too was unchanged from Karsk. Of course, back then, he had been changed more than any other man I have ever known by the events we had witnessed. He had gone from being a junior officer on the crew of a Baneblade to the commander of the bodyguard of one of the most important men in human history, and it had not changed anything. Nothing ever seemed to. He watched everything with the same cold, blank expression he had ever since the days when the lieutenant's brains had been splattered all over his uniform.

We were not the only ones present responsible for Macharius's security, of course. There were some who had been there longer, retainers of his family, summoned from his home world to replace the casualties of Karsk and beyond. They looked somewhat like Macharius. All of them had the same golden skin and golden hair. All of them looked like smaller, inferior copies of the great man made from a slightly degraded mould. There were men drawn from a hundred different worlds and a hundred different regiments, all of whom had fought for a position in the service of the supreme warlord of mankind. There were Catachans and Hemorans and Mordians and Telusians. All of them were joined in one brotherhood by their loyalty to Macharius and his crusade.

The *Lux Imperatoris* rocked again as another blast came close. I offered up a prayer to the Emperor and wondered if He could hear me from His throne on distant Terra.

A scribe approached and spoke to Macharius with the mixture of precision, formality and reverence that Macharius inspired in those around him. He was doing his best to ignore the shuddering of the ship and the possibility of instant death as he brought news of another victory. The worlds of the Proteus system had surrendered, bringing another three planets, ten hive cities and nineteen billion people back into the Imperial fold. Macharius nodded an acknowledgement, turned and said something to another clerk, recommending the general in charge of the campaign for some honour or other, and walked on.

Two more uniformed clerks approached and saluted. Before they could even open their mouths to speak, Macharius rattled off orders, sending instructions to commanders who were five star systems away, instructing them on which cities to besiege, which worlds to offer alliances to and which governors to bribe. He had no difficulty dredging up any of this knowledge. It was all there in his head, all of the details of an infinitely vast campaign the like of which had probably not been fought since the Emperor walked among men. He ordered more reinforcements sent to aid them and kept on walking towards the furthest tables.

Sometimes he looked up and gazed upon the surface of the burning planet with a look of longing in his eyes. I felt a certain sympathy for him then. Macharius was a warrior, born to fight. He loved commanding this great force, but I suspect he missed the thrill of physical conflict, the feeling of danger, of taking his own life in his hands. His thoughts were drifting to those final battles taking place on the world beneath us.

I could tell that he wanted to be there. I could tell also that he had something else on his mind, something to do with his current obsession with prophecies and divinations and ancient relics that so exercised his mind when he talked with Drake. It was a topic that drew the two of them together, it seemed, although Drake has never struck me as a superstitious man. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Here on the galaxy’s furthest rim, superstitions were common. These worlds had been far from the Emperor’s Light for a hundred generations; all

manner of strange, deviant and heretical faiths had sprung up, and all manner of weird beliefs had infected the populations. Some had even taken root among our own soldiers, although you would have thought they would have been immune to it. Clusters of prophecies had begun to gather around Macharius himself. That was easy enough to understand. The Lord High Commander appeared invincible, gifted with near-supernatural powers of foresight.

There were some who claimed he was blessed by the Emperor. There were others who thought he was a supernatural being himself. Reports had started to arrive of shrines being set up to Macharius on dozens of worlds and not just by those unbelievers whose temples to false prophets had been overthrown.

The ship shook. We looked at each other for a moment before we went back to pretending that nothing had happened. An officer in Naval uniform walked over.

‘A glancing strike to the void screens, Lord High Commander,’ he volunteered. ‘Nothing to worry about.’

‘I am not worried,’ Macharius replied.

‘I doubt they could possibly know this is the Imperial command vessel,’ said the officer. He clearly was more disturbed than Macharius as the possibility that they did occurred to him.

Macharius nodded and the officer pulled himself together, clicked his heels and saluted. As Macharius strode by, his mere presence seemed to reassure people. Worried frowns disappeared from the faces of scribes and star-sailors. Command must always look confident and that was something that Macharius managed supremely well.

We made our way towards one of the great command tables with utter casualness. Indeed, so relaxed was our approach that I knew that we were approaching the spot in which Macharius had the greatest interest. I had learned to read the subtle signals of his moods by then. Or perhaps I delude myself. Few men ever truly knew what the great general was thinking.

Ahead of us was the command sphere for the world we currently orbited. On its flowing surface was a representation of the continent we could see through the dome above us. Instead of being lit by the fires of burning forests, this showed representations of armies as glowing patterns. Ours were green. The enemy forces were red. Various runes indicated the

composition of the units, ours glowing steadily to show we were certain of their composition. The enemy forces pulsed with varying speed to indicate the margin for error in our scouts' reports on their position and strength.

Around the table stood a variety of ranking commanders and Drake. He was in theory an observer but stood with the air of a man who was actually in charge, at least until Macharius arrived. The High Inquisitor was tall and slim, with a pale, cold face and dark hair which now had a tinge of grey in it. Obviously the juvenat treatments had not taken so well with him, or perhaps he was simply much older than he had appeared when we first met and the drugs' effects had started to weaken.

I did not know much of the inquisitor's personal history, and he never volunteered anything to anyone in my hearing, even Macharius. He was a man much more used to asking questions than answering them. Uneasiness radiated from his person to those around him, in the same way as confidence emanated like solar rays from Macharius.

The High Inquisitor looked up as Macharius approached and smiled. I suspect that Macharius was as close a thing to a friend as Drake ever had, if friend is a word you can ever use in the context of an inquisitor. I had seen too much of his business in the past ten years to believe that he looked at the world with any more humanity than the Undertaker did.

Macharius nodded a greeting and went over to stand beside the inquisitor. The two men were of a height but otherwise were as different as two people could be. Macharius was physically powerful, Drake slender and ascetic and deceptively frail looking. Macharius wore the gorgeously braided uniform of the highest ranking Imperial Guard officer. Drake wore a plain black tunic and a scarlet cloak with cowl. Around him, a group of storm trooper bodyguards lounged like attack dogs. They eyed us as warily as we eyed them.

Drake nodded to me, which was not something calculated to make me feel any easier in my skin. He had taken an interest in me since Karsk, as he took an interest in all those close to Macharius. Often I had been summoned to his presence to answer questions about the general's moods and health. I had reported these conversations to Macharius, of course, and he had told me to answer truthfully. He clearly believed that I had no secrets about him to reveal to the Inquisition that they did not already know, and I suspect he was right.

Macharius turned to the tech-adept who stood by the command altar. ‘Give me a view of sector alpha twelve,’ he said. ‘Close magnification.’

‘In the Emperor’s name, Lord Macharius,’ the adept responded. He intoned a litany and moved his hands in some ritual gestures over the altar. We looked now at a three-dimensional map of a strange city. All around it was a clear, flat zone, where the forest had been burned early to provide a firebreak. The buildings were ziggurats, sheathed in metal, glittering in the light of twin suns. They looked as much fortresses as temples. They bristled with turrets and blister-bunkers and other fortifications.

War raged. Men in the uniforms of the Imperial Guard fought with fanatics in the green and purple robes of the local temple wardens. Blood flowed in the streets. The natives fought stubbornly, with the courage of zealots prepared to die for their misguided faith.

They were going to. So much was obvious. Inexorably, Imperial Chimeras and Basilisks and Leman Russ tanks pushed through the streets surrounding the stepped pyramids, moving in the direction of the gigantic central temple. Macharius looked at the colonel who had been liaising with the ground forces.

‘My orders have been conveyed?’ he said. There was a question in his voice, which was not like him. Normally Macharius gave a command in the full expectation of it being obeyed and then moved on. He did not check on subordinates unless something had gone wrong, in which case he moved swiftly and ruthlessly to correct the errors.

‘The ground commanders have been specifically instructed not to bombard the central temple. The soldiers know there is to be no plundering on pain of death and that demolition charges and heavy weapons are not to be used within its precincts, Lord High Commander. I made your orders very clear on those points. There can be no misunderstandings.’

‘Good,’ Macharius said, and the man seemed to swell with his praise. Like everyone else on the command ship, he knew Macharius would not forget his efficiency or forgive his failures. He had gained credit in the eyes of the most important man in the crusade, and rewards would eventually and inexorably be disbursed.

The ship shook again, more violently this time, as it took another glancing strike from a planetary defence battery. It made me uneasy. I did not like to feel that any moment I might be vaporised and that there was nothing I

could do about it. This was a battle fought with weapons so gigantic that ships with the populations of small cities could be destroyed in an instant, and an individual warrior could have no influence on his fate. Give me a ground battle or even trench warfare any time. At least there you can take cover and a few enemies with you.

The glow-globes flickered. A smell of ozone filled the air. Somewhere in the distance someone screamed. Someone else shouted an order. I suspect the screamer was being clapped in irons or assigned to a punishment detail.

'It seems that the enemy might be finding their range,' said Macharius. He chuckled and everybody else around him did the same. It was not that what he said was particularly funny, but when a general makes a joke, no matter how feeble, his subordinates laugh. It did dispel the tension.

Drake had ignored the near miss. He had been staring at the battle-map with total concentration, as if he could achieve a spiritual revelation if only he looked hard enough.

'We must have the Fist,' he said in a voice so low that only Macharius and those standing close to him could have heard it.

'Do not worry, my friend,' said Macharius. 'We shall get it.'

'We must,' said Drake. 'It may be one of the Imperium's most sacred artefacts – a relic from the time when the Emperor walked among men, a thing perhaps borne by one of his most trusted primarchs, a worthy gift for potent allies.'

Macharius smiled. He appeared to be considering something for a moment, which was unusual for him. Normally for him to think was to act, and to act with a decision and correctness that most ordinary men could not have achieved with hours or days of contemplation.

'In that case, I believe I shall secure it myself.'

Drake shook his head like a man hearing something he had feared but which he had hoped not to have to deal with.

'Is that wise?' he said. It was phrased like a question, but it was really a statement. Drake was one of the few men who would have dared question Macharius. It was a thing that was happening more and more in those days, as if a rift were slowly opening between him and the Lord High Commander; as if he, so seemingly secure in his faith, were starting to have doubts in Macharius. In this case I was with him, for I could tell from the rare and slightly crazed grin spreading across the general's face that

Macharius was serious. He really had decided to go planetside and lead the assault on the temple.

Drake knew as well as I did that once Macharius had made up his mind there was no possibility of deflecting him from his purpose, but the High Inquisitor was not a man to easily admit defeat.

‘You should not put yourself at risk, Lord High Commander,’ said Drake. I suppose he was thinking that he would be in trouble with his superiors if anything happened to Macharius. After all, he seemed to have taken on some responsibility for Macharius’s safety after the events on Karsk.

‘I have no intention of putting myself at risk,’ said Macharius. He was already striding towards the exit arch of the command centre, though, and all we could do was follow in his wake, like the tiny satellites of a gas giant or a cometary halo whirling around a sun.

Anton shot me a look that I knew well. A grin that was considerably more crazy than Macharius’s flickered across his face and was gone before anyone but me could have seen it.

Drake shrugged and began to stride along beside Macharius. His storm troopers moved in his wake, some of them even surging ahead as though they suspected danger might lurk in every corridor of the command vessel.

‘I shall accompany you then,’ said the High Inquisitor. ‘You may need my services down there.’

‘As ever, I welcome your company,’ said Macharius. ‘But admit it, you are just as keen as I to get your hands on the work of the ancients.’

A cold smile appeared on Drake’s face, one of the few I had ever seen. He was a forbidding man in a position of fearful power, and I doubt anyone ever mocked him the way that Macharius did. Perhaps he enjoyed the basic human contact. It must have been rare in his life. ‘I am certainly keen to know whether it is the thing we seek.’

The command ship rocked again under the impact of another planet-based weapon. I was suddenly glad that we were on the move, heading towards the shuttle bay. It would be good to feel ground beneath my feet again, and air in my lungs that had not been recycled through a ship’s fallible systems a thousand thousand times.

It struck me then that for all his courage perhaps Macharius felt the same way. Even for a man as brave as he undoubtedly was, waiting on a ship under attack, when any moment its walls might explode and you might be

cast into the chill vacuum of space, must have been a nerve-wracking experience. I asked myself if it was possible he was just as nervous as I and just hid it better.

I dismissed the idea as ludicrous.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWO

‘I told you this was a bad idea,’ said Inquisitor Drake.

We were pinned down behind a low wall while heretics poured autogun fire down on us. Bullets whined overhead and ricocheted off the brickwork. The cloud of lead was too dense for anyone to dare attempt to return fire. Merely sticking your head up would have seen it reduced to bloody pulp.

Behind us, an ancient tree, part of the temple gardens, was so riddled with metal slugs that it threatened to topple. The leaves had been stripped from all of the ornamental bushes. The ancient runic stone standing in a fish pond was chipped and splintered. A sundial cast a pockmarked double shadow on the ground.

I wondered if Macharius had finally made a fatal error. Perhaps his keenness to get his hands on the Fist of Demetrius would be the undoing of us all.

‘Nonsense,’ said Macharius with his infectious utter confidence. I looked over and saw that he was smiling. He was enjoying himself more than he had in weeks. His uniform was dirt-stained, blood was dripping from his cheek, a blister that marked the near miss of a las-bolt had started to rise on the back of one of his hands, and yet he looked like a man who could think of no place he would rather be.

One of his wild moods was on him. He had led from the front as soon as he had arrived on the scene, heading charges, striding across the field of battle as if las-bolts would swerve around him. Of course, Macharius had an

uncanny ability to always be where las-bolts were not. He seemed to know instinctively when to step aside, when to take cover in a doorway, when to throw himself flat. His reflexes were almost inhuman. And if his reflexes did not save him, I suspect the High Inquisitor's psyker powers did.

Drake did not look like he was enjoying himself. He saw no humour in the situation. He was a man who considered himself too important to throw his life away in a small skirmish on the side of a minor temple on some backwater world.

'Nonsense?' he said. I could tell he was coldly angry and keeping his anger on the leash. It was a novel experience for him. Macharius was one of the very few people who did not quail at the sight of his wrath.

Macharius said, 'In approximately two minutes Alpha Company of the Bjornian Snow Raiders will appear on that rise over there…' He pointed off to the south, where some burned-out stumps of trees marked all that was left of one of the gardens that had once covered the sides of this temple. 'In one hundred and fifty seconds, Crimson Company of the Nova World Regiment will take up position on the roof of that observation bunker…' A nod showed us where Macharius confidently expected the troops to appear. 'They will pour enfilading fire on the heretic position, and we shall sweep forward and take the gate.'

He spoke with utter certainty that would have been mad in anyone else but which was justified in his case. I had seen him do this before and ninety-nine times out of a hundred he would be right. He seemed able to foresee the twists and turns of combat amid the chaos of a battlefield.

Of course, not even Macharius was right all the time. I sometimes wondered at what he did, the way he courted death. He was one who needed to put himself in peril. It was only then that he was fully alive. It was a dangerous trait for an Imperial general to have and possibly Macharius's only weakness.

'Lord High Commander, the heretics are advancing on us,' said the Undertaker. He might have been reporting the fact that our lunch had just been delivered from the field canteen.

The storm of fire had slackened over our heads. I could hear the shouts and battle-cries of the oncoming fanatics of the temple guard.

Macharius nodded as though he had expected this all along. Perhaps he had. You could never tell with him how much was skill, how much was

knowledge and how much was just a superb bluff. ‘Now all we have to do is hold our ground until the reinforcements arrive.’ He checked the chronometer on his wrist. ‘We have approximately ninety seconds.’

With that he stood up and snapped off a shot with his customised pistol. A heretic went to meet his false god. I looked at Anton and Ivan. Anton held the sniper rifle he had picked up on Dolmen. He had become quite proficient with it. Ivan still carried his standard-issue lasgun. As one, we moved into the kneeling position and saw a wave of fanatics rolling towards us as inexorable as the rising of the tide on the third moon of Poseidonis.

I did not need to aim. There were so many of them packed so close together that I could not miss. I just pulled the trigger and pumped the combat shotgun. It tore men apart, but still they kept on coming. The others fired their weapons. They could not miss either. Men fell, robes on fire, flesh seared to burned meat.

Drake stood as well, an eerie glow surrounding him and extending itself to cover Macharius at his side. I shuddered. I had never adjusted to the sight of a man using those inhuman powers, even if they were sanctioned by the Imperium in Drake’s case.

Of course, there were other things with the heretics. Their priestly caste had guardians. They looked like great white apes with heads resembling those of wolves. They looked twice as tall as a man, stronger than an ogryn and about as intelligent. Local superstition claimed they were inhabited by the spirits of warriors chosen by the forest gods. A tech-adept had assured me the transfer was achieved by means of ancient spiritual engines.

To tell the truth, it did not matter to me in the slightest at that moment. The sight of them, with their arms three times as thick around as my thighs, their huge claws and their massive fanged mouths, was almost enough to make me turn tail and flee. Perhaps the most horrific thing about them was the near-human intelligence in their eyes. It was strange to see it gleam out of such savage, bestial faces.

‘Hold your ground,’ Macharius said. ‘Not much longer now.’

One of the huge ape-wolves bounded forward in a spring that covered thirty strides in a heartbeat. By instinct or design it had somehow managed to pick out Macharius. Possibly it sensed who was the dominant figure in our ranks.

It landed on top of Macharius, bowling him over. It bellowed and

screamed and rose, covered in blood. I aimed a shot at its head. The shell tore away flesh and fur, leaving only bone gleaming. I looked down expecting to see Macharius's torn form, but he was unscathed except for some rips in his uniform where those massive claws had torn.

I looked at the stomach of the great beast as it roared and tottered and stretched towards the sun. I saw that its chest was sheared open, flesh rent and bruised in the distinctive pattern that a chainsword leaves. There had been no need for me to shoot it. Macharius had somehow eluded its grip and struck a killing blow.

I had no time to brood on this idea. The wave of heretics hit us. The only barrier between the two forces was the wall we had been hiding behind, and that was so low a fit man could leap over it with ease. I found myself grappling chest to chest with a burly heretic. Somehow I managed to break out of his grip, knee him in the groin and then bring the butt of my shotgun down on his head with an audible crunch. I turned and caught another man in the stomach.

The fighting was close and deadly. Ivan bludgeoned around him with his metal fist. Retractable studs and blades had emerged, turning it into something far worse than simply an ancient mace. He used his arm to block incoming bayonets. I think his foes were surprised by the nature of his shield for none of them managed to land a telling blow.

I looked around to make sure Macharius was safe. Anton stood near him, sniper rifle in hand, still shooting. His speed and accuracy were impressive. No one managed to get close to him and somehow in all the chaos he managed to pick his targets well. Of course, the shimmering glow of Drake's shield protected Macharius and the inquisitor from any accidental hits, and he could unleash death with complete confidence that he would not mow down the very people he sought to protect. It was a small advantage, but in that sort of combat you take any you can get.

A heretic pointed a slug-gun at me. I threw myself to one side and twisted. Idiotically, I aimed the shotgun at him and pulled the trigger. The weapon's kick almost dislocated my shoulder. The shell did a lot worse to the heretic's stomach.

One of the great ape-wolves bounded towards me, enormous muscles bunching under its fur, great clawed hands flexing as if it intended to rip me apart. Its mouth was open in a howl. Saliva glistened on its yellowish tusks.

I pumped the shotgun, knowing I was only going to get one shot. I took aim at the open, screaming maw. I tried to ignore the fact that it was almost upon me, that all it had to do was reach out and it could crush my head with one enormous paw. I pulled the trigger. The shell passed through the roof of its mouth and took off the top of its head. The impact was enough to send the corpse toppling off-balance onto the heretics behind it.

I let out a long breath and something hit me with the force of a sledgehammer. My arm went numb. I was spun around like a rag doll tossed across a room. I fell, sprawling, as pain seared my bicep.

For a moment, I had those horrible suspicions you always have when you take a hit. Was this it? Were these my last breaths? Was everything about to go black?

I struggled with the pain, trying to fight off the darkness, determined I was not going to let myself fall forward into the grave if I had any say in the matter. Out of the corner of my eye, looking up at the purple-tinged sky, I saw something. The Snow Raiders were exactly where Macharius had said they would be. They were firing down into the flank of the heretics from their elevated position. I hoped they had enough sense not to fire their heavy weapons into a melee. The same thought had occurred to Anton. He picked up the fallen banner of Macharius and raised it as high as he could, obviously intending to remind the newcomers exactly who was down here.

I heard screams from the other side now, and I realised that for once Macharius had gotten something wrong. The Nova Worlders had not taken up their assigned position but instead were swarming forward to take the heretics in the flank and rear. Under the circumstances it was a better thing than firing into the melee, but it was going to cost them in blood. They would have been better off maintaining their distance and pouring on the fire.

But, of course, they had seen the lion’s head banner and realised the general was in peril, so they had leapt to aid him with no thought for their own lives. It was the sort of loyalty Macharius inspired in all those who encountered him. The general responded like the hero he was, charging forward, chainsword flickering, killing everything that got in his way as he moved towards the newly arrived Nova Worlders and away from the flanking fire of the Snow Raiders.

I picked myself up, shotgun in one hand, unable to move my wounded

arm. I looked down at it. It was bleeding but not heavily. I let the shotgun fall at my feet, knelt and fumbled for my knife with my good hand. I peeled away the bloody cloth of the sleeve and looked at the arm. There was bruising and blood and mangled flesh. I was going to have to slap some synthi-flesh on it.

Just as the thought crossed my mind, a heretic leapt at me. He had an ancient curved bayonet attached to the barrel of his rifle, and he intended to skewer me with it. I threw the knife at him. It was a bad cast from an injured man, and all that happened was the hilt of the weapon smacked him beneath the eye. I had just effectively disarmed myself. I thought I was doomed, but at that moment, Ivan hurled himself between us, blocked the stab of the bayonet with his mechanical arm and then leaned forward. I was tempted to look away, knowing what was coming.

Ivan's mechanical jaws clamped shut on the man's windpipe. He shook his head, tearing out the man's throat. Blood spurted as an artery ripped, spraying Ivan's face. Droplets of blood ran down the metal half of his features like red tears falling on a mirror. I felt someone loom over me and turned ready to strike. Anton took a step back as if scared I would stab him. I asked him if that was the case.

'You don't have a knife,' he said with his idiot grin. 'It was a nice trick disarming yourself like that. Really lured the heretic into your trap.'

He moved closer, eyes scanning for trouble. Ivan was on top of the heretic's corpse now, still tearing at it like an attack dog. The fulcrum of the combat had moved away. The melee swirled around us but we were in the clear, surrounded by corpses and those who would soon be corpses.

Something sticky hit me on the arm, and I realised Anton had slapped synthi-flesh on my wound.

There was cheering. Macharius's banner flowed back towards us, borne by a tide of newly arrived Imperial Guard. I realised Anton must have let it fall or given it to someone else when he had come to aid me. Ivan looked up. All around his mouth was red gore. His metal teeth were red too. It looked as if he had been in a terrible accident but, of course, all the blood belonged to the man whose throat he had bitten out.

All three of us moved towards Macharius. Inquisitor Drake gave us a long hard look. I wondered if he thought Anton and Ivan should have stuck with the Lord High Commander. There was a chilly moment while his cold blue

eyes rested on me, then he turned away. His storm troopers kept looking, though, as if they had noticed their master's gaze and decided that they needed to pay special attention to anyone it studied so. It was hard to tell. I could not see their expressions through the face masks of their helmets.

Macharius himself did not seem to care. His face was alight with triumph and the pleasure that victory in physical combat always gave him. I was sure that he had noticed everything, though. He always did, and he never forgot.

A field medic came rushing up. First he went to check on Macharius and Drake. I saw Macharius point in my direction, and the adept came over and began to patch me up. In minutes he had adjusted the synthi-flesh sealant. My arm was cool and numb. For the moment I could not use my shotgun, so I hung it over my shoulder and drew a sidearm.

More and more of our troops came into view. Valkyrie troop-carriers were starting to drop storm troopers on the roof of the central step of the ziggurat now that all of the anti-aircraft weapons on the structure had been silenced.

Ahead of us lay the massive ebonwood door of the complex and, beyond it, the ominously silent halls within which the ancient wonder Macharius and Drake sought was said to lie.

There was still resistance within the temple, but it was sporadic and all the heart had gone out of the defenders. I suppose that even they knew it was hopeless now. Their sacred wolf-apes were all slaughtered. Their elite guards had given their lives to no avail. The priests themselves did not appear as keen as their soldiers to go and greet their gods. We caught sight of a number of them scuttling off into the distance as we approached.

Once again Drake had come well prepared. The layout of the temple interior already seemed familiar to him. His spies must have briefed him well or fed records from the local datacores into the technical slate he carried. He strode along confidently with Macharius at his side. They did not appear at all troubled by the thought that they might encounter enemies. I wished I shared their confidence. My arm was starting to lose some of its numbness, and I felt the first faint twinges of pain. The shotgun felt heavy and useless on my back, where Anton had helped me strap it.

From different corridors came the sounds of combat, and it began to sink in what was happening. We were moving through a zone that had already

been cleared by soldiers of the crusade.

They were creating and expanding a perimeter within the temple, driving back the heretics, taking them prisoner or executing them. As we walked, groups of woebegone unbelievers were herded past us. They had the look I had seen on the faces of the defeated on a hundred worlds. It's always the same: a compound of fear and sorrow, and just the faintest hope that they might still be allowed to live or might somehow be able to turn things around. Hope is a weed that springs up in the human heart at the slightest opportunity, even in our cruel age.

We entered a vast cathedral nave. In the centre of the room was an enormous altar. A massive metal gauntlet shimmered above it. Ancient technical sorcery made it float in the air. The gauntlet looked as if it had been made for something the size of one of those ape-wolves. It had monstrous articulated fingers with what appeared to be talons at their tips. About it was an air of tremendous antiquity and something else, perhaps holiness. Runes had been etched on its surface that were not like any I had ever seen before.

A glance at Macharius's face showed keen interest. Drake's features were a mask, but cold excitement glittered in his eyes.

Under the guns of some of Drake's storm trooper bodyguards stood a group of ancient-looking men. They were robed in green and purple. Their heads were shaved except for a long topknot, and their beards were bound into two forks. All of them wore torcs on their arms and metal gauntlets on their right hands. One of them, obviously the high priest, carried an incredibly ornate staff, carved with runes in a similar style to those on the gauntlet.

As Macharius strode forward, one of them attempted to break free from the storm troopers and throw himself at the general's feet. Macharius nodded for the man to be allowed to rise. He was not afraid of some ancient priest. He even helped the man to his feet. It was done with his usual magnanimity.

Macharius put an arm around the man's shoulders and together they walked towards the great armoured gauntlet. He stood there for a moment looking down on that incomprehensibly ancient artefact.

Macharius said something to the priest in a voice so low that not even I could make out what it was. The priest shook his head. He looked like a

confused old man who did not quite understand what was happening. He leaned heavily on his staff. I wondered if he was just the figurehead of the local clergy and whether real power in the temple hierarchy lay elsewhere. I looked at the other priests. There were certainly some sharp-looking characters there. They watched the proceedings with keen eyes. One of them even said something to another in the local language, perhaps a comment on Macharius's treatment of their superior, before being knocked to his knees by a storm trooper.

Macharius made a chopping gesture to indicate there should be no more of that. The storm trooper's mirrored faceplate tilted to one side, and I sensed he was looking to Drake for confirmation. The High Inquisitor gave the slightest of nods and the storm troopers relaxed a little. I doubt the significance of the exchange was lost on the Lord High Commander, but he gave no sign of taking offence.

Macharius went over and helped the stunned man to his feet. He did not seem bothered by being surrounded by former enemies. I suppose they had already been checked for hidden weapons by Drake's people, but it was still an impressive display of nonchalance. I could tell the locals were impressed despite themselves. Macharius had that effect on people. He used it as well as he did any other weapon.

Drake was already giving orders to a group of servitors who had entered the chamber with a mechanical trolley, and they began to manhandle the Fist onto it. The priests set up a wailing that would not have been out of place at a bereavement ceremony on Trask.

Macharius raised a hand and stared at them in his best parade ground manner. Slowly they fell silent. 'I regret we must relieve you of this sacred relic, but it is necessary that we do so. The Imperium of Man has need of it.'

'But your excellency…' said the old high priest in his quavering voice. 'The Fist is a treasure passed down from the time when the Emperor walked among men, left in this temple as part of a sacred trust by Saint Leman Russ himself.'

It was gibberish, of course, but the old man clearly believed it.

'It may well be that the trust is about to be fulfilled,' said Macharius. 'And it shall be returned to its rightful owners.'

'You will be cursed for this blasphemy,' said the priest. His voice was

cracked and there was a disturbing look of madness in his face. He pointed his finger directly at Macharius and screamed, ‘Cursed!’

The storm troopers beat him down and this time no one intervened. Macharius did not look troubled, but the words seemed to echo eerily around the chamber.

Bored. I am bored. The waiting hangs heavily on my hands. I seek entertainment. It is easy enough to find in its simplest form. I watch the slaves being transhipped to our cattle-carriers and select out a few choice morsels on which to feast. Their obvious terror provides some simple satisfaction in and of itself, but such rustic pleasures cannot long distract me. I find myself brooding on the nature of the gate and what we have found here. The idea that I might be wrong gnaws away at me like a boreworm in the bowels of its victim.

I work upon my symphony using a polytonal synthesiser and an auto-wrack. The screams of the flayed humans mingle with the flurry of notes I improvise on the multiple keyboards, but it remains unsatisfactory.

Sileria comes to my chamber and I while away an hour teaching her the pleasures of obedience. I think in her heart of hearts she really desires to be a slave. It is often the secret fantasy of the strong. I make her confess as much under the pleasure lash. She sounds convincing, but it all may prove to be part of the role she has assumed. Sometimes, I see a look in her eyes that spells out the fact that she believes that one day I will assume her part. In this she is sadly deluded, but it hardly seems sensible to tell her this.

I study the maps of the world and order my warriors to strike almost at random. The idea is to keep the humans guessing, to let them project their own patterns on what they perceive, to make plans based on incorrect information and their own fears and prejudices. It will keep them tied down while my true plan unfolds. And, of course, it keeps my warriors sharp and blooded, and swells my coffers with the flesh of the slaves they take.

How much longer must I wait? The gate should open soon. Then we shall see what we shall see.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THREE

Anton looked at the Fist of Demetrius where it lay in pride of place on a great marble slab of a table. He flexed his fingers experimentally and held up his hand in front of his face as if measuring its size against that of the ancient gauntlet. I could tell he was thinking about slipping his hand inside it. He was still that kind of idiot.

‘Don’t,’ I said

He glanced around. We were alone with the Fist, back on the *Lux Imperatoris*, in the cluster of luxurious chambers surrounding Macharius’s own rooms. Ancient maps of a thousand systems decorated the walls. Captured banners and pennons spoke of hundreds of victories. Magnetic clamps held the Fist in position. Macharius seemed to like to contemplate it.

We were standing guard, just outside the main chamber. Inside, the inquisitor and the general discussed the next stage of the crusade or, for all I know, debated the finer points of Imperial theology. Of late, many small points of conflict had arisen between them. The ship was making its way to the transit point in preparation for the jump to Emperor’s Glory.

Ivan said, ‘You think this thing really dates from when the Emperor walked among men?’

‘How would Leo know?’ said Anton. ‘Even he’s not that old.’

I looked at it. Macharius and Drake had certainly treated it with reverence. It had that strange old-new look of archeotech, that lack of ageing that only the works of the ancients showed. ‘I don’t know. It looks old, though.’

‘You think it really belonged to Russ? That it might have been in the presence of the Emperor himself?’ There was a hunger in his voice that I recognised, a desire to experience the presence of the infinite, a wish to touch that which had once touched the divine. We are told to take so much on faith, but this might be a physical manifestation of that faith, an artefact of ancient times. Certainly Macharius thought so.

‘How would I know?’ I walked around it. It was a power gauntlet of some sort, made for someone larger than a man. I would have struggled to lift it with both hands. How could anyone have worn it? Maybe it had something in it that made it lighter or amplified the wearer’s strength when it was worn. Many of the weapons of the ancients were magical that way.

‘What does Macharius want it for?’ Anton was doing it to needle me, I felt certain, piling one seemingly naive question upon another, trying to provoke an answer.

‘Why don’t you go and ask him?’ I said. ‘Say you’re having trouble sleeping at night and you won’t be able to rest until you know. I am sure he will listen to you.’

‘There’s no need to be sarcastic.’

‘There’s every need to be sarcastic,’ I said.

Ivan pinged his metal jaw with his metal finger. His gaze went from his artificial hand to the Fist. He held his hand up, palm towards him, fingers spread. One by one, he moved his fingers; I heard the whine of servo-motors as he did so. He was looking at the moving rods and pistons visible in the joints of his hand. I looked at the Fist and saw that they were there, on a larger scale.

‘He’s been collecting a lot of this stuff,’ said Ivan. He was not looking at either of us. ‘Maybe he wants to start a museum or a collection of relics in the palace back on Emperor’s Glory.’

‘Maybe,’ said Anton. ‘But would he really risk his life just to add one more thing to his collection?’

‘Who knows why he risks his life?’ Ivan said. ‘I think sometimes he does it because he is bored.’

‘The idiot is right,’ I said. ‘He particularly wanted this one, and he wanted it now. He came here personally to supervise the attack on Demetrius. There was no need for that. He could have ordered it just as easily back on Emperor’s Glory.’

‘Maybe it has magical powers,’ Anton said. ‘They say many of these relics do – that they can heal the sick, cure the lame… smite daemons.’

Those last words hung in the air uncomfortably. None of us really wanted to be reminded of the daemons we had seen back on Karsk. And yet, once again, I could not help but feel that Anton in his idiot way might have stumbled on something. Macharius had been amassing his trove of holy relics since that time. What he had seen in the Cathedral of the Flame had altered him. He had looked into the eyes of a greater daemon back there, something that would have broken the sanity of a lesser man.

Certainly since then Macharius had been changed inwardly if not outwardly. He had become more driven, and much more fanatical than the man we had followed across the treacherous, rebellious hives of Karsk.

‘You think he wants all these ancient holy artefacts so he can fight daemons when he meets them?’ Anton asked. He was looking from face to face now, like a child afraid of the dark seeking reassurance from his parents. The difference was that Anton knew there really were monsters out there in the night.

‘I don’t think that’s impossible,’ was all I could find to say. The doors to Macharius’s inner sanctum opened. Macharius emerged. ‘Best get ready to depart,’ he said. ‘We will soon be making the jump to Emperor’s Glory.’

I wondered if he somehow knew what we had been talking about.

We were in our stateroom when the signal for the jump was given. Warning lights started to flicker red then blue. Klaxons sounded one long blast then one short blast then one long blast. There was an interval of a few heartbeats before it started again.

‘Here we go,’ said Anton. He looked sickly. He had never liked warp jumps. I could hardly blame him for it, no sane man does. I looked out of the great stained armourglass porthole. Already a massive blast-shield was sliding into place over it, like the black disc that takes a bite out of a sun during a solar eclipse.

‘Interstellar jumps,’ said Ivan. ‘I hate them.’

‘You always say that,’ I said.

‘Because it’s always true,’ said Anton. He sounded nervous. It was the only time you were ever likely to hear him so. More even than Ivan he detested this part of space travel.

‘It never gets any easier,’ Ivan said. ‘How many jumps do you think we’ve made? Two hundred, two hundred and fifty?’

‘I’ve never counted,’ I said.

‘Me neither,’ said Anton.

‘That’s because you can’t count over twenty,’ said Ivan. ‘And if you ever lose a finger or a toe you won’t even be able to count that high.’

‘Ha-bloody-ha!’

He moved towards the couch and was starting to strap himself in. I began to do the same. Even as we did so, the last of the stars and the blackness of space vanished behind the metal transit shutters. The lights stopped flickering and became steady, and yet it felt like we were sitting in the dark, waiting for something terrible to happen. I could remember a similar feeling during my childhood in Belial, when the gangs used to fight outside in the corridors of our building and there was only a thin thermaplas doorway between us and them.

You always hear stories about ships that go missing: ghost ships lost in the warp for centuries, crewed by dead men, and those that have suffered catastrophic, inexplicable disaster in the endless darkness of space. People dismiss such things as mere tales, but they crop up with remarkable regularity anywhere star-sailors gather and the crews of the great interstellar ships come to drink. And there is no one, no one at all I have ever met, who does not sense the sheer wrongness of it when a ship makes the jump into that terrible sub-realm beneath the skin of the ordered universe, where they go in order to travel the vast distances between stars.

I never really know what to expect. All jumps are different. Sometimes they happen so smoothly that you don’t even know they have taken place. Sometimes entering the warp is like being in a shuttle as it hits atmospheric turbulence on its way down. Sometimes it is a lot worse. This time, there was just a weird sensation of falling, a momentary nausea and then nothing much at all for what might have been heartbeats, or might have been millennia.

‘Is that it?’ Anton asked. He sounded shaky but relieved. His words had an odd sound to them, though, as if they were coming from a great distance away and subtly distorted.

‘Well, we’re still here,’ said Ivan. ‘Wherever here is.’

He had put his finger on it, of course. We had no real idea where we were,

and we were not going to have until the ship reached the exit point of its transit. Only the Navigator guiding the ship had any ideas about that. We were cut off from all sight of our surroundings by those huge armoured blast-shields. No one aboard the ship would talk to us about what was taking place, and I suspected that few of them actually knew. It was one of those things we were discouraged from asking questions about when we were common soldiers, and we had never gotten back into the habit of doing so when we became attached to Macharius's command.

'How long do you think we're going to be here for?' The note of worry was back in Anton's voice. It was one of those things that was strangest and most difficult about warp travel. You never knew how long you were under. The ship existed in a bubble separate from normal time as it passed in the universe above. Your wrist chrono and the ship's clocks might say one thing, that you had been away for a few days or a few weeks, but when you reached port and consulted with the Imperial standard timepieces maintained there, you might find that days or months or years had passed instead. There were tales of people who had been gone for centuries and did not look a day older when they returned.

'Who knows?' Ivan said. 'And I mean that most literally. I doubt even our captain and his pet Navigator have the answer.'

Slowly, things started to settle, Anton's voice sounded normal. It was as though our minds were becoming accustomed to their new surroundings.

We settled down for the journey.

I do not know how long we were in the strange realm but somehow it felt too long. The days seemed stretched. There were odd gaps in my memories. My dreams were troubled. When not on bodyguard duty all of us spent time prowling the endless corridors of the ship, exchanging words with the crew. They were tense, as a crew always is when crossing the warp. They were all too aware of what could go wrong.

Then it happened, the thing that every star voyager fears. Warning lights flared. A terrible vibration passed through the hull of the ship. Weird moaning cries filled the air. I sprang upright in my bunk and reached for a weapon.

'What in the name of the Emperor?' said Anton. He pulled himself upright, tugged on his gear and reached for a weapon. It was as instinctive

for him as it was for me, although the chances were that there was nothing for us to fight out there.

‘I don’t like this,’ said Ivan. It was understandable. No one likes to hear alarms going off on a starship, particularly not one under way.

‘Really,’ I said. ‘Why ever not?’

‘It makes it difficult to sleep,’ he said and wrinkled a nostril.

The ship started to vibrate as if it were being impacted by a shower of giant meteorites.

‘That’s not good,’ said Anton. His fingers were white where they gripped his sniper rifle. I nodded. I knew we were all thinking about those tales of ships that had sailed off into the dark between the stars never to be seen again. Maybe we were about to find out what happened to them.

All of the lights flickered and went out for a moment. My mouth went dry and my stomach lurched. The thought that without power a starship is just a gigantic coffin entered my mind. No air getting purified and circulated, no heat to drive back the cold of space. No void shields to ward off enemies. It was so black in the cabin that I could not see my own hand, let alone the faces of my companions. I thought of tombs. I thought of ships full of frozen corpses floating through the infinite void. I thought of haunted vessels uncovered a thousand years after they last set out by terrified Imperial explorers. I took a deep breath and told myself not to panic.

It was hard. I could feel my heart pounding against my ribs. I closed my eyes, though it made no difference to the amount I could see. The knowledge that each breath might be my last filled my mind and brought with it a primitive, animal fear. I told myself to breathe, then to take another breath and then another. As long as I was doing that I was still alive. Every breath was a small victory over death.

‘Leo,’ said Anton. There was an undercurrent of fear in his voice.

‘Yes?’ I said. I was proud of the fact that my voice came out level and strong.

‘Any chance of you paying back those five credits you borrowed on Glory?’

‘Not till next payday.’

‘Guess I’ll have to wait then.’ The ship began to shake, violently, like a hive in the grip of a quake. I could feel the vibration passing through my body. The whole floor seemed to be moving up and down. My head hit

something hard, and stars flickered across my field of vision. Something wet ran down my brow, blood most likely. I grabbed the support strut of my bed. Muscles twisted in my arms as I tried to maintain my position. I felt the ache of my wound return redoubled. I was not healed well enough for this. I bit back a shout of pain.

The vibration increased. It was far worse than anything the *Lux Imperatoris* had endured from the planetary defence batteries back in the Demetrius system. I heard a groan from across the room and the clatter of metal hitting metal, and it came to me that Ivan had been tossed right across the chamber.

There were great groans from the hull as if the metal were coming under enormous stress, and the shuddering and bucking of the ship reached a crescendo. Suddenly, everything was silent and still. For a moment I heard nothing save the sound of my own breathing. It was not a good sign. The last thing you want to hear on a starship is silence. It might be the last thing you ever hear.

I was uncomfortably aware of all the sounds that were missing: the rumble of the drives, the whoosh of the great air-circulators, the low humming of the lights, the hundreds of small noises that signalled that the ship and its crew were alive and well. I held my breath, wondering how long it would be before all the systems failed and we died. At that moment, the lights flickered back on. I looked around the cabin. Ivan lay on the ground nearby. Anton was hunched up in his lower bunk, glaring wildly around, fists wrapped round the support stanchions he had been using to hold himself in place. With a groan Ivan raised himself from the floor and said, ‘Someone should have a word with whoever is piloting this ship. I think he still needs to learn a few things.’

‘He got us through whatever it was,’ Anton said.

‘We don’t know that yet,’ I said. They looked at me. I mopped blood off my face with a rolled up shirt and wondered what was going on.

Along with Macharius we stormed onto the bridge of the *Lux Imperatoris*, pushing through corridors that teemed with uniformed crew members performing urgent repairs. Hundreds of officers bustled around, reacting to incoming data, barking orders into speaking tubes, saluting as they took orders in turn from their superiors. Half the holo-screens looked dead. Tech-

priests moved around them intoning technical liturgies as they performed the rituals of maintenance and repair on cracked command altars. The air stank of incense, rising above half-melted machinery. It made me nostalgic for the old days, for riding in the belly of a Baneblade.

The ship's captain was sitting there on his command throne, surveying his officers as they went about their work. His face was darkened on one side by some kind of flash burn. Men limped and nursed injuries. Medical adepts inspected bodies stretched out on the floor between command altars.

'What happened?' Macharius asked.

'We were caught in a warp storm, Lord High Commander,' the captain said. 'It came upon us suddenly as we passed through the immaterium. It separated us from the rest of the fleet. We could not remain in it without being destroyed. Our Navigator plotted an escape course that brought us up in this system. It was the only thing he could do, otherwise we would have been destroyed.'

'And where exactly is this?' Macharius asked. The captain steepled his fingers and let out a long breath. He looked at one of the officers who wore the uniform of an astronavigator, a grizzled, grey-haired man with his arm in a sling.

The astronavigator said, 'I will need to take sightings and plot our position on star charts to be entirely certain. My initial observations lead me to believe that we are in the system marked as Procrastes on old charts, but I would like to confirm that. When a warp storm strikes you can be driven a long way from your initial destination. We are lucky our Navigator managed to bring us out at all.'

'I'm aware of that fact,' Macharius said.

'It is a relatively rare occurrence, Lord High Commander,' said a smooth new voice. We looked around. A member of one of the great Navigator Houses had entered the command deck. He must have come from the sealed chamber from which he guided the ship. He was a mutant, but the third eye which he used to look out into the warp was decently concealed by a thick brocade scarf bearing the emblems of his House and calling. He did not wear Naval uniform. Instead, he was dressed in the sort of formal court clothes that one associated with the great merchant Houses of the Imperium. 'The main thing is that we have survived. Many do not.'

The captain looked up from the divinatory altar that he was studying. 'We

have suffered some damage to the ship as we exited the warp. It will take us a few hours to perform repairs.'

One of the officers rose and turned to his captain, clicked his heels, saluted and made a report. 'Sir, we are picking up considerable comm-chatter. It seems that there is a human inhabited world in this system, and it is coming under attack by xenos.'

That got Macharius's attention. 'Record those communications and relay them to me. I wish to know what is going on here.'

If the Navy captain was offended by that peremptory instruction he give no sign of it. 'Of course, sir,' he said. 'But there is nothing we will be able to do until we restore the main power cores and get our engines back online again.'

'I want you to keep me informed of every development,' Macharius said. 'I want to know everything that is happening here. If those xenos make a move against us, let me know immediately.'

'It will be so,' the captain said. We followed Macharius off the command deck.

We looked out the huge circular viewport at the dark, dark curtain of space beyond. Macharius had returned to his chambers for the moment, leaving us to our own devices. We had chosen to inspect the damage to the ship from the nearest vantage point to our berths.

The armoured shields had been rolled back. I could see the great pockmarks in the ship's sides and the small human figures moving along them, checking for flaws in the hull. From here I could see exactly how huge the ship was, a self-contained worldlet, larger than a dozen parade grounds, large enough for an army to march across. There was a suggestion of mountainous hills in the way the superstructure rose over the plains of the lower hull.

'Think they'll find anything?' Anton asked.

'If the hull had breached while we were in the warp we most likely would all be dead now,' I said.

'Not if it got holed at the last moment, as we emerged. Something might have broken in then,' he said.

'You've been listening to too many sailors' stories,' I said. 'Next you'll be saying that a hundred years might have passed since we left Demetrius.'

‘Well, they might have,’ said Anton.

‘Yes, they might have, but what difference would that make to us? We’re still alive. That’s all that matters.’

‘We might have missed the crusade.’

‘We could not be that unlucky,’ said Ivan.

‘I doubt any more than a couple of weeks has passed,’ I said, not at all liking the direction this discussion was taking. None of the others seemed to have realised that all of the things they secretly feared had already happened to us. None of us would ever be going home. All of us were marooned in time and space. All we had left was each other and the people we knew. The Imperial Guard was our home now. It had been for many years.

‘Any idea where we are?’ Ivan said.

‘Not where we’re supposed to be, that’s for sure,’ I said. ‘This isn’t Emperor’s Glory. The sun’s the wrong colour.’

‘Another hellhole in the back of beyond then,’ said Ivan. ‘Some things never change.’

‘You think we’re lost?’ said Anton. There was a faint note of panic in his voice.

‘We might be,’ I said, just to wind him up. It was Ivan who chose to break the suspense.

‘Even if we are, they’ll soon find a way to get us home.’

‘Did you see that bloody mutant, that Navigator?’ said Anton. I looked around to make sure none of the crew were close enough to overhear him. The crews of ships are strange. They spent a lot of time locked in these durasteel coffins. They are loyal to each other, and they have no love for outsiders. Not that Anton ever paid much attention to such things.

‘He’s a mutant who has the blessing of the Imperium,’ said Ivan. I could tell the words were making him uneasy even as he said them.

‘Gives me the creeps,’ said Anton. ‘They say they have an extra eye in the middle of their foreheads, that’s why they keep them wrapped. They say it looks into other places, let’s them see things that are not there.’

‘You’ve seen things that weren’t there, when you’ve drunk enough,’ I said. I watched a tiny figure clamber over a gargoyle on the hull. He seemed to come unstuck, like a fly taking off from a wall and began to drift off into space. I wondered if I was watching a small, distant tragedy about which I

could do nothing. It would not be for the first time in my life.

I could see Anton's features reflected translucently in the armourglass. He sucked his lower lip thoughtfully. The scar flexed on his forehead. He was uneasy. 'It's bad enough having to get on these ships,' he said eventually. 'Now we don't even know where we are.'

'Not much different from usual in your case then, is there?' said Ivan.

'You think there might be some sort of curse on the Fist? You think it might be responsible for this happening? Those priests weren't too happy about us taking it.'

There had been a time when I would have laughed in his face for suggesting such a thing, but I had seen too many strange things since we left Belial. We all had. I watched the drifting crewman. He was tugging himself back in on a line. Maybe he had drifted off deliberately to get a better view of the hull section. In any case I felt relieved.

'You think some heretic priest's curse is stronger than the blessings on this ship?' Ivan asked. 'It's as venerable as a Baneblade and served the Emperor just as long as *Old Number Ten*.'

Anton appeared to consider this. 'No, probably not.'

'Good,' said Ivan. I wondered at the vehemence in his voice and suspected he was just as uneasy as Anton. He just hid it better.

'Don't worry, we'll get home in one piece,' I said and added *eventually* in a murmur too low for the others to hear.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOUR

‘Lord Ashterioth,’ Sileria says. ‘There is something you should see.’

I look at her, mortally weary of existence, and I say, ‘I am already looking at you.’

She smiles at the flattery but says, ‘A ship has been detected.’

‘Eldar?’ I ask, wondering how my enemies could have found me. What mistake had I made that they picked up the trail so quickly?

‘Human,’ she says. ‘It emerged into real space from the translocation point some hours ago.’

‘A trader?’ I say. It seems the most likely explanation. I know this world is not part of any of the human political blocs in this part of the galaxy.

‘The energy profile fits that of a warship, lord,’ she says.

‘Just one? Not a fleet?’

She nods. ‘It could be a scout. It is not progressing in-system. It is holding a position near the translocation point.’

‘You think it some form of advance guard?’ I begin to play back our invasion of this place in my mind. When we seized this world, no distress signal was sent on any of the channels we monitored, and we could not have missed anything the human’s primitive systems could broadcast. I know they do not have any of the psykers the humans are foolish enough to use, the so-called astropaths.

‘The energy profile is unusual,’ she says and hands me the vision-slab.

I see instantly what she means. ‘Very low emissions for a warship of that

displacement. It is damaged, a straggler from a fleet perhaps, or survivor of a warp storm washed up here.’

She nods again, and I smile coldly. ‘Muster the fleet,’ I say. ‘Let us go and take a look at this unexpected prize.’

‘It could have been worse,’ said Drake. He was sitting in one of the massive leather armchairs in Macharius’s state room. Macharius sat across the table from him. There was a regicide board between them. Neither had touched it in hours.

‘By this you mean we could be dead,’ Macharius said. His face was grim, and I thought I understood why. There was nothing he could do here, the repairs of the great warship were outwith his area of competence. He was just as helpless as the rest of us, and he did not like it in the least little bit.

‘I mean things could be worse,’ said Drake. His voice was patient. He seemed a man much more used to being patient than Macharius at that exact moment. I knew this was not entirely the case. Macharius could be as unflappable as a stone idol when waiting on news from a battlefield. Then he was never flustered. This was something different.

‘I must be on Emperor’s Glory soon and with this cargo intact,’ said Macharius.

‘We have suffered very little temporal displacement according to my chronometric readings,’ said Drake. ‘Once the repairs are done we shall be back under way. We will not have lost much time.’

‘If our crew can locate where we are and plot a course home,’ said Macharius. ‘Something went very wrong on our way out.’

And there it was, the thing that was on all of our minds. Something had gone wrong and none of us were sure what it was. If we had been on a battlefield, Macharius would have known and understood any setback. Here we were just sentient cargo.

It never fails to worry me exactly how vulnerable all starships are. In the event of the Navigators going mad, getting killed or being taken out of action, there was no way of a ship getting home. No normal man could look out into the warp and pick the ship’s path through that strange sub-universe. On the back of this fact, the Navigator Houses had turned themselves into one of the great powers of the Imperium. It was possible to argue that without them there would be no Imperium at all. Without starships, how

would the great armies move?

The air flickered and a holo appeared in the air above the table. It presented a picture of the ship's command deck.

One of the watch officers suddenly stood up at the divinatory altar he was supervising, spoke something to the ship's captain, who gave an order to his subordinate, then spoke to Macharius.

'Lord High Commander, I must report we have picked up signals from multiple incoming ships. Xenos.'

'Hostile?' said Macharius. There was little chance they would be anything else.

'We must assume so.'

'I will need access to command echelon sub-nets of the ship's vox systems,' said Macharius. 'And I will need it now.'

The captain nodded. Macharius strode over to an altar and called up internal schematics of the ship. Being who he was, he had most likely memorised all of them earlier, but he wanted access now. He put a comm-bead into his ear and slipped a microphone under his jaw just as the battle-stations warnings echoed through the ship.

Ignoring them he began to speak commands, gravely, precisely and with a certain relish.

Our ships spiral gracefully out-system towards the contact. I sit at the helm and study the vision crystal. All around ancient power sources hum. The crew perform their duties in the long oval chamber, its ruddy light turning them into bloody phantoms. For a moment, I contemplate the beauty of the intricate mechanisms that keep me alive and move me across the face of the void.

The human ship has not moved, and its energy signature has not changed. It appears to be just sitting there waiting, as if daring us to come closer. I ask myself could this be a trap? Is it merely pretending to be crippled to draw us into combat? Certainly the profile of the ship makes it look powerful enough to provide a challenge were it in a proper state of repair. It is a battleship, massive and armed with multiple batteries of primitive but potent weapons.

I measure the strength of my fleet against it. Even if the vessel were at full power they would be sufficient to ensure our victory. I am certain of it.

Nonetheless, I am uneasy. Once again the universe presents me with what looks like a gift. Once again I wonder what lies beneath the mask of reality. I push doubt aside. Even if a human fleet were to emerge from the daemon-haunted wastes they are foolish enough to traverse, we would simply retreat.

There is no real threat here. I give the order to assume attack formation.

'How many xenos?' Macharius asked. There was no tension in his voice, no sign of any unease. He was doing something he had been born to do. A sense of calm competence flowed out from him as heat flows from a fire. We had relocated to the bridge of the ship. The whole time we had moved Macharius had kept up a stream of communications with the commanders of his bodyguard regiment, deploying them to critical points around the ship, setting them in readiness for any boarding action. He seemed to have no doubts about his knowledge of where the best positions would be. He was almost certainly right in this.

'A dozen ships, Lord High Commander,' said the captain. 'None of them of more than half our displacement, but that means nothing with xenos. They may each have firepower equal to an Imperial ship of the line, and carry a complement of warriors equal to our own combined force.'

A faint frown flickered over Macharius's brow. 'Are our weapon systems back in commission?'

'Void cannons and main batteries are powered up. If we had another few hours we could simply have made the jump out of this system and avoided any conflict. General repairs are almost complete.'

'How about your Navigator – has he calculated our position and course?'

'He is working on it.'

'Perhaps you could suggest to him that he work a little harder.'

'Of course, Lord High Commander.'

Drake studied the flickering runes hovering over the altars. 'The xenos vessels are eldar.'

The captain rapped out an order to one of the crewmen. A partially translucent image hovered in the air above us, showing a long, shark-like vessel, whose sleek lines bore no resemblance to any human craft. The image shimmered and shifted as other eldar ships sprang into being. All of them were subtly different but were obviously the product of the same alien

sensibility. There was something strange about the way they flickered, as if they were not quite present in our space. Sometimes they grew indistinct and vanished entirely, leaving only areas of darkness behind them. Our auspex systems were clearly having difficulty pinning down their position.

'Tell me about them,' Macharius said. His tone was conversational.

'They are most decadent and repulsive creatures, given to enslaving and torturing their victims. They exist outside the Emperor's Light and are our eternal enemies.'

Macharius's eyes narrowed. 'Slavers. We can expect a boarding action, then.'

'They will try and cripple us first,' said Drake. 'Destroy our drives, erode our void shields, silence our weapons.'

'Then they won't have much work to do,' said Macharius, not without a certain sardonic humour.

'That's true.' Drake seemed to hesitate for a moment.

'And?' Macharius said.

'And what?' Drake replied.

'You look as though you want to say something else.'

'It would probably be best not to be taken alive,' said Drake. 'These creatures have a reputation for tortures of the most heinous sort. They take pleasure in it.'

There was something in his tone that suggested he was understating the extent of their cruelty, and that just made it all the more frightening.

'If they want to take us alive, they will need to board the ship,' said Macharius. 'If they do, we shall teach them the error of their ways.'

He sounded confident, but then he always did. 'Let us go to the command deck and see if we can encourage our Navy comrades to more speed.'

We are within range of visual pickup. I order ultimate magnification on the vision crystal and the human vessel leaps into view, a mountain of metal against the velvet backdrop of infinite night. It has the crudity of all human work, and I wonder again at the indifference of a universe that can allow such a species not only to exist but, apparently, to thrive.

Of course, it is not indifference. Long ago the cosmos proved itself to be actively malevolent, but still… The fact that it allows such beings to go on existing is proof positive that it has no taste.

Consider the human warship. The least gifted eldar child could create a vessel far more beautiful. This is a slab of metal covered in gargoyles, bristling with weapons. The lines are as blunt as a gulbak's club. It is as if the humans are so afraid of the cosmos that they feel the need to present what they consider a frightening face to it. It is a vessel designed to intimidate children. It shows no understanding that the truly dangerous creature has no need to show how dangerous it is.

It appears damaged. The thick armour looks pitted and wrecked as though the claws of some gigantic beast have swept along its length scraping away ribbons of metal. There are flickers of light where primitive chemical flame welding devices are used to patch the incisions.

'It does not look like a trap,' I say. Sileria glances up at me.

'It looks like an idiot's attempt at sculpture,' she says. We both laugh.

'Nonetheless, it is armed,' I say at last.

'What is it doing here?' she asks. 'It shows the markings of the human Imperium. They are not supposed to be within a hundred light years of this system.'

'Some new migration, no doubt,' I say. 'The barbarians are on the move once more, looking for new worlds to conquer.'

'Why here, why now?' Her words echo submerged thoughts floating through the under-consciousness of my own mind. She is wondering if the ship's presence has anything to do with our own or is mere coincidence. It is a weakness all of the eldar have, this solipsism. We believe the universe rotates around us. The more intelligent of us are aware of it, of course.

'We shall, no doubt, find out soon enough,' I say. 'Once we have taken a few new slaves and feasted on their agony.'

'I look forward to it,' she says, looking up at me and licking her lips.

There was a faint vibration as the ship's engines flared, and once again we were under way. The crew had laboured mightily over the past few hours and it seemed that their efforts had been rewarded.

The astronavigator looked up from his charts, set aside his astrolabe and glanced around as if noticing all of the activity surrounding him for the first time.

'I believe we can make the jump, captain, now that the ship's generators are capable of powering us.'

‘How long and how far until the insertion point?’

‘Roughly half an Imperial astronomical unit,’ said the astronavigator. ‘It should not take more than two hours, but it places us on a convergent course with the xenos.’

The captain was obviously making some calculations of his own. ‘The eldar will be upon us before then. We will still have to fight.’

‘Shall I begin pre-jump preparations?’ said the Navigator. The captain did not look at Macharius. ‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Now all we need do is survive the next couple of hours,’ said Drake. ‘And hope the ship takes no more damage before we can make the jump.’

Macharius looked at the enemy ship on the screen, staring at it as if he were looking on the face of an enemy.

‘Xenos,’ he said. ‘Have we come so far from Imperial space?’

The Navigator looked at him. ‘We are within one hundred light years of the boundaries of the Segmentum Pacificus.’

‘They are very close to the crusade,’ Drake said, obviously following the line of Macharius’s thoughts.

‘Scouts, perhaps, come to observe us,’ Macharius said.

‘Who can tell how xenos think,’ said Drake. ‘They may just be raiding here, or combining their raiding with scouting.’

‘They will need to be dealt with,’ said Macharius.

‘Most assuredly,’ said Drake. Neither of them seemed to have any doubt that they would survive to see that done. For myself I was not so sure. I did not like the sleek, cruel and confident lines of those oncoming alien ships.

I study the vision crystal. The human ship is moving now, drive power apparently restored. It still appears just huge, ugly and ungainly amid the darkness of space, but in movement it has taken on an aspect of menace. Gargoyles clutch the durasteel of its hull as if prepared to fly into battle. The scarred maws of primitive destructive engines emerge from its weapon bays. They pulse with energy, clearly being made ready for battle.

Sileria looks at me, awaiting my decision. Eagerness is obvious in every line of her body. She looks like a lash-hound straining at the leash to begin pursuing its prey. She runs her tongue over her pouting lips. Her pupils are expanded. Her breathing shallow. She is contemplating the banquet of pain that will present itself when we board the vessel and use its crew for our

pleasure. If I decide that we should do so.

Command decisions are rarely so simple. Primitive as the human vessel is, both the divinations and its harsh lines speak of destructive power. It is no longer crippled and immobile. I do not doubt for a moment we can overcome it, but we may ourselves take damage in the attempt. Is it worth risking ourselves when we are so close to my ultimate goal? In a few more days the gate will be open…

'Lord Ashterioth, the human vessel is changing course. It is positioning itself for an attack run,' says the helm. I smile, astounded and oddly pleased by the arrogance of the humans, that they would dare attack us rather than flee in terror when they had the chance. It is this more than anything else that makes up my mind. We do not flee from our inferiors, not unless the odds against us are overwhelming.

'Order the fleet to attack,' I say. 'Let us teach these apes a lesson. Prepare the Impalers! We shall board them and take some slaves for the Dark Feast.'

The ship shuddered again as the eldar weapons slammed into it. Somewhere in the distance a generator whined and threatened to overload. Was it just my imagination or was there a tang of ozone in the air? All around us the bridge seethed with activity. Officers shouted commands into vox-communicators and relayed reports from weapons batteries and turrets. Ships' engineers bellowed incomprehensible catechisms of technical chant. The captain listened tensely and occasionally gave an order that sent crewmen scurrying.

I looked at Anton and Ivan; we were standing close to the commanders on the bridge along with the rest of the green-tunicked bodyguards, but we were not within earshot. Macharius, Drake and the others seemed to be too involved in preparing for a possible boarding action to pay any attention to us.

'They are hitting us pretty hard for creatures who supposedly want to take us alive,' said Anton.

'What would you know about it?' I said. 'For all you know they could be hitting our shield generators.'

'Hark at the expert on ship to ship combat,' said Anton. 'When did you join the Imperial Navy?'

'About the time your brain shrunk to the size of a nut.'

‘Looks like we’re going to find a new sort of xenos to kill,’ said Ivan. The servo-motors in his fingers whined as he flexed them.

‘Can’t wait,’ said Anton in a voice heavily laced with irony. ‘Just as I was looking forward to some rest on Emperor’s Glory, this had to happen. Trust these Navy boys to get even something so simple as a jump wrong. And they did not manage to just get us to the wrong place, no! They managed to drop us right into a proper little wasp’s nest of decadent slavers with a liking for torture. I must congratulate them on that, sometime – with a bayonet.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Ivan. ‘I’ll make sure you don’t suffer a fate worse than death.’

‘Who’s going to save you,’ Anton replied.

‘Leo will,’ Ivan said. I glanced up at the image of the eldar ship. It was at once sinister and strange. I wondered at the sensibility of a people who could build something like that. I had been told that in space, the size, shape and structure of a vessel do not matter all that much as long as its basic framework is able to endure acceleration. That being the case, the predatory lines of those eldar ships did not say anything good about their builders, or the creatures within them.

Drake was studying the ship just as closely. His eyes were narrowed. A look of concentration was on his face. I wondered what was going on inside his mind. I doubted he was afraid, but he did not look entirely happy either.

Macharius continued to receive reports and calmly give orders. Occasionally he too would glance up at the image of the ships closing with us, as though he were trying to divine the exact nature of his opponent from that visual manifestation. Sometimes he asked a question of the captain and was given a terse response.

He steepled his fingers and closed his eyes. In his mind the whole ship had become a battlefield and he was laying out his forces according to the plan he had formulated.

‘One hour until jump,’ said the astronavigator.

Even I could see that it was taking too long. We were never going to get away.

The human ship comes closer. The vision crystal stays focused on it, so the distance appears to be the same. Only the vectors on the augury arrays have

altered, lengthening to show the vessel's increased speed, darkening to show it is preparing its energies for warfare.

Dots on the board indicate our own ships, accelerating into attack positions, preparing to strafe the warship, to soften it up for boarding.

In the crystal I see the glint of energies in the enemy's weapon bays as its armaments power up. I feel a faint flicker of excitement. It is always possible that a lucky shot might destroy my command ship, or even simply kill me, allowing my vessel to survive. What of it? It would not be the first time I have died. The haemonculi can always rebuild me if even the faintest fragment survives. But then, for that to happen they need to be able to find the fragment and, even if they do, who willingly gives themselves into the hands of the masters of pain?

Reports begin to pour in over our communication channels. Our ships are opening fire, carefully, calculatingly, aiming for weapons and void shield generators. They seek not to destroy our enemy but to neutralise its weapons and defences. That ship and its crew represent a prize to us so they are careful not to do too much damage to their future property.

The enemy feels no such compunction. They unleash their potent, primitive weapons. Blades of energy stab across the void; lines of fire, brighter than the stars, seek our ships, which even now slide into evasive positions, the dark ripple of their shadowfields concealing their position from the foe.

There are certain small pleasures to be had in witnessing a battle in the airless deeps of space. There is the swift-moving beauty of the vectors on the table, the eerie glow of plasma contrails in the infinite darkness, the slowly spinning stars that glare down on the battle with the cold eyes of eternity.

That said, the combat is too distant and impersonal to be truly pleasurable. It lacks the ecstatic communion of predator and prey, the heady, intoxicating agony of the victim as they fall to the blade. No eldar can truly enjoy such battles as they do the swirl of melee.

I give the order to take us in close. I want to board this arrogant interloper's vessel and make its crew suffer. I want to look in the face of my kill as it dies writhing.

I order Jalmek to take the helm as I prepare to lead the boarding party. I smile with anticipation as I make my way to the Impaler.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIVE

I stand on the boarding ramp of the Impaler, surrounded by my personal guard. They grin and smile, readying themselves for the hot joy of battle. I keep my face cold and distant as a leader must, but in my heart I know what they are all feeling, for I feel it too.

In my mind I picture the ebb and flow of the ship to ship combat. I see our vessels whirl and spin and feint, a cloud of fire-wasps stinging at a running sabre-tiger. Some aim for the weapons, some for the sensor eyes, others dive and swirl and spin, seeking only to distract the humans, to keep them from guessing where the killing thrust will come. All of this concentrated action exists only to prepare the way for this boarding action, for the swift joyous launch of the Impalers as they race to make contact with the enemy vessel.

I picture our assault craft racing towards the enemy ship, a swift, sleek sliver of crystal, hurtling on a contact trajectory that will lead to inevitable victory.

Divinatory scans have revealed the weak points in the human hull. They have been matched with memory crystal records of other attacks on similar human ships, which have been downloaded into the biosystems of my battle-armour. These will be matched against the actual layout we encounter, providing predictive maps to show us where to go. Half a dozen forces will advance from their separate entry points, spreading terror among the human crew, making surgical strikes against all resistance.

We are aiming for the armouries and the power cores of the vessel, to cripple its defences and its ability to resist, to leave it floating helplessly in space for our ships to destroy at will. I slide my helmet into position. I allow myself to smile. This is what I live for, to prove my superiority once more in the crucible of battle.

A sour feeling settles in my stomach. Of course, these are only humans. There is no glory to be gained in overcoming such, only a certain crude sustenance to be fed on. Still, it is better than nothing.

A faint vibration passes through the ship as the hulls come together. The boarding spikes engage. External cutters swing into place to prepare our route into the human vessel at the airlocks, the weakest point.

I glance around at my followers now, all as armoured as I, all as ready to do battle. Row after row of warriors prepare to leap into the gap. They raise their weapons in salute.

The enemy hull gives way. The massive leech mouth of the forward orifice dilates to reveal the interior of the vessel beyond. I catch the strange scents of alien air, laced with the pheromonal patterns of unfamiliar emotions, tiny exquisite hints of past agonies, products no doubt of old battles and recent accidents.

I dive forward into the revealed breach. The faint tang of human life and emotion pervading the thick air envelops me.

Long, tense seconds passed. The ship shook. It felt like an earthquake rumbling through the giant hull.

‘Lord Macharius,’ said the captain. ‘Our hull has been breached. The xenos have boarded us.’

Macharius smiled. ‘We will engage them then.’

The captain did not look up from the tactical screens. ‘By all means, Lord High Commander, please do. I must remain here and supervise this battle. There are emergency suits in those lockers. Please take them. You may find yourself in places where our life support systems have failed.’

Macharius glanced around at us. ‘Let us go and kill some xenos.’

I checked my shotgun and got ready to fight.

We suited up. It was merely a matter of donning the void-hardened armour from the lockers and putting the rebreather helmets in place. It was all done

according to the ancient drills. Macharius had patched himself into our own networks. Our troops were ready to engage, but so far he had restrained them. Knowing him, it was all part of some plan.

We made our way out into the corridors beyond the command level and dropped down a grav-shaft into the body of the ship. All the while, Macharius kept murmuring commands into the comm-net, telling our troops to remain steady, to wait, that our time would come.

Whatever he was going to do, I hoped he would do it soon. The xenos appeared to be making their way unopposed into the very heart of the ship. Even as the thought crossed my mind, Macharius spoke with calm authority. ‘Begin the counter-attack now.’

The human ship is crude, sheets of metal riveted together, primitive mechanical systems that reflect their simplistic view of the universe. Lights flicker. Great horns pulse warning howls through the ship, no doubt letting them know that an enemy is aboard.

I race through the grey-metal corridor, following the predictive map, surrounded by my warriors. All are keen to encounter prey, to grab their share of glory beneath the gaze of their commander, to bolster their status in my retinue by outshining their rivals. Of course, all ultimately seek my place, but at this moment in eternity they must vie for my favour and I, like every other leader in eldar history, will use this to my advantage.

Massive metal doors are shutting in place. They are simple enough to override as we make our way into the depths of the ship. Ahead of us, our first group of humans emerge into the corridor. They turn as they see us, doughy features twisted in animal fear. They fumble stupidly for weapons.

I spring forward, blades whirling – sever a head, expose a spine, remove a limb before ever my feet touch the deck. I roll forward, putting myself below the line of fire of my bodyguards, whose shooting scythes down the remainder of the humans.

Good. So far my presence has ensured restraint. No one has yet made any attempt to over-gorge on agony. They are doing their best to simply remove the obstacles between us and our objectives, which is just as well, for there will be plenty of time later for nourishment, once this vessel is ours.

We race on, heading towards the core of the vessel, to the place where the ship’s primitive engines lie. More uniformed humans loom ahead of me. I

chop them down so that I can admire the pattern of the blood spurts on the wall.

Normally I would not be so spendthrift of slaves, but we have a world behind us and these primitives represent just a few thousand more lives. I can give vent to my contempt and disgust without thought of the cost.

I listen to reports on my helmet channels. Sileria informs me that resistance is light. Bael claims that the humans are too scared to stand and fight. Everywhere across the ship it is the same story. I suppose it could be that the humans were just taken so completely by surprise that they can mount no resistance, but I do not like it. Something feels not quite right here. I inform Manali's force to remain in reserve and ignore her disappointed grunt. It does not matter to me how much she wants to claim her share of the spoils, she must do as she is told or face the consequences. It would not do to be taken off-guard by these primitives.

As that thought occurs to me, I hear a shout and sounds of fighting behind me. It seems we have opposition here after all.

Uniformed humans begin pouring down the corridors. They are dressed in green tunics with some sort of golden feline's head embossed on them. They are not like the other humans in simpler uniforms, who I now perceive must be servants or ship's crew or both. They lay down a curtain of fire with their lasrifles that is dense and difficult to avoid.

I spring into a doorway and consider what is happening. Nearby, Drakin falls in a withering hail of fire, armour cracked, crystal flaring with a greenish chemical glow in the heat.

Reports flood in over the communications channels. All of our forces are now encountering resistance. It cannot be coincidence that this all happened simultaneously. Somewhere on this craft is a mind capable of a primitive form of tactical thought.

Judging by the points from which the reports are coming in from, it has deduced our likely objectives and chosen to allow us to advance deep into the ship before mounting a real defence. That being the case, it is only logical that forces will be moving into place behind us to cut off our retreat. Perhaps I am overestimating the mon-keigh mind of my opponent, but better to do that than walk into a trap from which there is no retreat.

I dispatch squads to the rear to check and clear our exits, and I order the remainder of my force to begin flanking the beasts who oppose us. I shall

leave some squads here to create the illusion that we are making a serious attempt to break through while we move around.

There is no way these primitives can match the mobility of eldar. We shall achieve our breakthrough; it is merely a matter of concentrating our firepower where they are weakest. Soon this ship will be ours.

We headed for the hull levels where our forces were already engaged and came to a vast open rampway, strewn with the bodies of the crew, many of them hideously mutilated. Amid them moved lean and sinister alien shapes that looked like spindly humans with enormously elongated heads. It took me a moment to realise that this was merely their armour.

At rest there was something insectile about them. You expected their movements to be swift but jerky with the machine quality you see in mantises. It was not so. In motion, they possessed eye-blurring speed and the grace of dancers.

There was only a comparative few of them below us, and they were confronted by a full company of Macharius's bodyguard, but they did not pause for an instant. They did not flee. They attacked, springing forwards like predatory beasts. Their weapons made little sound but men died, flesh stripped, bones glittering, throats wrenched into agonised screams. Perhaps the bolts that hit them were poisoned, maybe the weapons were designed to inflict the maximum pain, but I had never seen men suffer so as they expired.

'Stand your ground!' Macharius roared. We stood. When the Lord High Commander gave an order, you obeyed, no matter how awful the death you faced.

The eldar raced towards us. We laid down a curtain of fire that drove them scurrying backwards, seeking cover in doorways and corridor mouths. A ragged cheer went up from our ranks. Macharius did not acknowledge it.

'Squads one and nine, cover our flanks. They will attack us from there next.'

No sooner had he given the order than I heard more shooting start. The eldar had very swiftly regrouped and attacked from other directions with terrifying swiftness and ferocity.

Macharius rapped out more commands, steadying our boys. He dispatched the Undertaker and Anton and another squad to the right flank. I wondered

if I would see either of them again. He kept speaking into the comm-net, ordering companies and squads into new positions, talking with the unit commanders, keeping himself abreast of the developing situation on the ship and interjecting words of command and encouragement to the soldiers around him.

I stood next to him, wondering even after all those years at his demeanour. I clutched the shotgun in my grip and kept my eyes peeled in case more of the eldar attempted a frontal assault. To my eyes, there was no pattern to anything, only chaos.

A wave of them surged forwards suddenly, breaking towards us. Individually the xenos were a match for a dozen Guardsmen, and they fought with a fluid, swift-moving ferocity that constantly probed our position for weak points. They would seem to fall back, morale broken, only to come surging ahead again with renewed ferocity. There were feints within feints, bluffs within bluffs.

The eldar died hard. We had the weight of numbers and we had Macharius. That should have been enough, but somehow it did not feel as easy as it ought to have.

As the reports of enemy counterattacks came in, Macharius ordered men forward to meet the threat and to neutralise it. His commands not only sent reinforcements to our embattled soldiers, they put units in flanking positions. He seemed to understand instinctively what the eldar would do, and know how to deal with it.

As the minutes ticked away, a grim smile played over his lips, and I realised that he was enjoying himself. These blood-soaked corridors were like a game board to him, and he had found a challenge worthy of his talents. The fact that his life and all of our lives were at stake was immaterial to him. He paused for a moment and looked around.

Drake stared at him. ‘How goes it?’

‘The xenos move constantly,’ Macharius said. ‘They use their mobility to probe and strike and search for weak points. They are overconfident. They are not used to being outmanoeuvred. I am building a net with multiple strands, ringing them round with layers of force. Moving our men to where they will need to strike next. I leave some weaknesses in the pattern so that they do not realise what is happening. They have nothing but contempt for us. They think they fight this battle on their own terms. I will beat them

before they are aware they have been defeated. By underestimating us, they defeat themselves.’

He said it with his usual confidence, and I believed him. With Macharius, war was as much a matter of psychology as it was strategy and tactics. He had looked into the minds of those xenos and understood them, at least the part that related to fighting, which was all he needed to understand. Their assessment of his gifts was unflattering but that meant nothing to him. It was just another factor in the cold equations of combat that ran through his mind, an advantage that would give him victory, or so he believed.

I was correct. The humans cannot match our mobility. What I did not take into account is that they don’t have to. They can rely on their superior numbers. I have moved my forces along alternative routes, but wherever we go they are waiting for us. It seems that the mon-keigh opposing me has deduced the most likely routes of our attack and moved his forces there to meet them.

Were the humans able to move just a little bit faster they would be overwhelming us. As it is, we are holding our own but getting bogged down in the conflict with their superior numbers.

I can see the realisation is starting to filter through into the minds of my underlings. They no longer joke and make confident predictions of the number of slaves they are going to take and devour. They are starting to take this conflict seriously. It is no longer a leisurely amusement to them. They are beginning to respond with increased aggression, to take less time over the small cruelties and indignities they like to heap on their foes, and work at simply killing them. They are very good at this.

I am starting to wonder who is organising this. Could it be that some of these humans are like orks, with an instinctive gift for warfare?

At times we fought silently. At other times screams like damned souls in torment told us that the xenos had claimed another victim. I have fought many foes, human and xenos, in my time. I have even stood against the servants of Chaos, but I don’t think I ever hated anyone the way I hated those eldar. Mostly the Emperor’s enemies are the Emperor’s enemies, and I kill them – sometimes coldly and sometimes driven by the rage and fear that strikes a man in combat. But there was something unutterably

loathsome about these xenos.

I listen to incoming reports on the channels. The humans are fighting back hard now, and our warriors are beginning to encounter much fiercer resistance. The other commanders still sound confident, but I am liking this less and less. My forces have yet to reach a single one of their objectives. This whole ship is turning into a gigantic death trap. My own force has been driven far from my original line of attack.

Perhaps it would be best to cut our losses, withdraw and destroy the humans at a distance. Letting the killing lust take possession of me was an error. I can see that now.

Suddenly, nearby, I catch the faint pheromonal spoor of something I have not sensed in a very long time. The tang of something other than a mere human, of beings who were worthy foes, who could endure agony far better. I catch the scent of a Space Marine. Perhaps this explains the difficulty we are having. If that is the case, there is a simple way of dealing with it. We need only find him and kill him.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIX

We moved squad by squad through the corridors. In the distance I could hear screams and the sounds of weapons being fired. I caught the scent of burning flesh and an odd spicy odour that I did not recognise at all. I saw no pattern. There was nothing I could grasp, only the random-seeming ebb and flow of combat.

Macharius kept giving out instructions, shooting and chopping as he went. Another wave of eldar came at us, more numerous and ferocious than the last.

'Hold your ground,' he shouted. 'Reinforcements will soon be with us.'

I prayed he was correct. The eldar fought like daemons, slicing through companies of green-tunicked Guardsmen. These ones were different, even faster and more deadly than the previous bunch and possibly even more degenerately cruel.

I dreaded getting to grips with them. My wound still gave me a little pain, enough to slow me at a critical moment. If Macharius felt the same fear he gave no sign. He spoke calmly and, as if from nowhere, more squads threw themselves into the combat, catching the eldar in crossfires, pulling them down by sheer weight of numbers, for in the confined space their superior agility counted for less.

Something dropped from above me. I threw myself backwards and heard a scream as a blade pierced the chest of one of the other guards. Something blurred past me, hit the floor and bounced into an upright position, bringing

a gun to bear on Macharius. Drake raised his hand and the air between the xenos and Macharius shimmered. The shots were deflected somehow. The xenos made an odd trilling sound that might have indicated frustration or perhaps some utterly alien emotion I would never grasp. I aimed the shotgun and pulled the trigger.

I would not have hit if the creature had not, for a heartbeat, stood frozen in place. Normally it would have been too eye-blurringly swift for me to draw a bead. The shotgun blast caught it on the backplate of its armour, shattering it. Alien blood emerged from the cracks. The creature still would not die, though. It flipped backwards, moving towards me, as though it knew who shot it and was determined to get revenge. I pumped the shotgun and tried to get a fix on it.

Another shot clipped the eldar as it twisted through the air. It landed awkwardly. I saw Macharius standing behind it, still giving commands even as he squeezed off another shot. It caught the eldar in the back and sent it spinning. I could see Macharius had hit the weakened armour and torn through it. The eldar kept coming, slower now but still seemingly determined to kill me. I stepped to one side, hoping to be able to shoot from an angle where there was no danger of hitting Macharius or anybody on our side. It was almost at a distance to use its blade on me.

Ivan came barrelling towards it. It slashed at him but he deflected the blade with a sweep of his mechanical arm. Sparks flickered. Ivan twisted and caught the weapon between the bicep and forearm of his bionic limb. I stepped forward and smashed the eldar on its helmet with the butt of the shotgun. It somehow sensed my presence and tried to twist to avoid being hit, but Ivan partially pinned it. There was a terrible crunch as my weapon connected with its helmet. The helmet did not break but the eldar flopped to the ground. I had broken its neck with the force of impact.

I was glad.

I bound along a corridor, cutting down another human. I peel away part of its cheek with my finger-blades then throw it into its companions, blood spouting to blind them. As they howl with rage and despair, I move among them, killing the ones I choose, crippling others, letting some live to wonder why they were spared. They do not wonder long as my personal guard overwhelms them. They lack my artistry, caring only for the pain they can

inflict and devour. In a way they are as feeble-minded as the humans. What can they find to feast upon in the petty gobbets of pain they cause here? Granted, create sufficient havoc and you have a banquet of agonies, but it is chaotic and unrefined and lacks savour. My followers are gluttons not gourmands. Of course, that is why they are my followers.

I pass through an open bulkhead door into chambers that are luxuriously furnished in a primitive human fashion. I sense the Space Marine is close. The aura is stranger now that I can catch more of it, ancient and unliving. I glance around and locate the source. It comes from a gauntlet, pinned to a marble slab by some sort of restraining clamps, displayed as if deserving of reverence.

It is an ancient object, curiously fascinating. Unlike so much human work, there is a sense of craftsmanship about it, primitive but functional. There is a trace of the aura of ancient battles, of old bloodshed and pain, a tang unlike anything I have savoured before.

What is it doing here? It seems there are no Space Marines aboard this ship after all. It has been guarded like a treasure and presumably it is worth something to the humans. More to the point, it may be worth something to me. I lift it and take it, passing it to one of my guard. As I do so I hear a warning come in over our comm-channels. It is from Jalmek, the pilot of my boarding craft.

‘Lord Ashterioth, we have ascertained from the vector and angular velocity that the human craft is preparing to enter the warp. It looks like they are planning on escaping us through the forbidden realm.’

Is there a hint of gloating in Jalmek’s voice? I feel a sudden lurch in my stomach. The humans are mad enough to travel through the realm of the soul devourers. If I am still aboard the vessel when it makes the jump, all that I am will be lost to the ancient enemy of our kind.

For a moment, I picture Jalmek giving the order to pull away, leaving the attack force stranded in this most terrible of all predicaments. If that is the case, there is only one way to forestall such a fate: cripple the human ship’s engines before it can make the jump or take over its bridge and force the conclusion of the jump attempt that way.

I ask for reports from my sub-commanders. They are making progress towards their objectives but very slowly; too slowly. I consider ordering them all to concentrate on driving towards a single objective.

It might work – but then again the human commander has shown himself perfectly capable of understanding and responding to our attacks. He will merely regroup and concentrate his forces to prevent us from achieving our objective. He could slow us long enough to ensure we are trapped aboard the vessel while he makes the insane leap into the forbidden. Pure terror at that prospect begins to flare in my mind, the unreasoning fear that all eldar have of confronting She Who Thirsts.

We don't have time. We don't have time. The panic beats on my brain in waves. I am filled with the nauseating fear that we will be trapped aboard this primitive vessel as it makes its leap into the realm of madness; that our beacon-bright souls will attract the attention of the devourers.

The prospect of abandoning some of my bodyguard on the ship to achieve exactly this saunters into my mind. I imagine the fear of the stranded eldar and the fate of the humans as their vessel is warp-lost. It is a prospect not without appeal but I would not be there to enjoy it, and nothing would be more likely to spark a mutiny among my troops than the suspicion I had done this.

I bark out orders to begin the withdrawal. We will return to our ship and destroy this vessel at our leisure.

I sense disappointment among the stupider of my followers who wish to continue to fight and feast. The wiser heads understand the reason for my decision. I sketch an ironic farewell to the human commander in the air. Enjoy your petty victory while you can. It will be short-lived.

I take the gauntlet with me. It will be an interesting souvenir of this encounter.

I saw the body of one man, partially flayed, skin stripped away from his flesh to reveal muscle and vein. He was still alive, paralysed by poison but in terrible agony as the venom slowly destroyed his nervous system in the most painful way. In the heat of combat, amid the fury of battle, what sort of sentient being takes time out to torture a victim, to peel them like an epicure consuming a drugged black grape?

There were too many examples of that sort of thing for me to imagine that the first was simply an accident. The eldar killed in an unclean fashion, caused pain for the pure pleasure of it, showed no more regard for life than a small boy tormenting a garbage scuttler. There were times when it seemed

they would rather torture than fight. No – it did not seem that way, it was that way. For the eldar, pain was like a drug to which they were addicted. They craved it the way a dried-out boozehound craves his next drink.

In the midst of chopping their way through a company of men, they would suddenly pause, stand stock-still save for their helmeted heads, which would swivel from side to side, surveying everything as serenely as a man inspecting a garden.

At such moments, if you glanced around, it appeared that there might even be a pattern in the way the corpses had fallen, some strange symmetry in the lie of the severed limbs on the floor and blood spatters on the walls. It sounds bizarre, but that's the way it seemed to me; that if I looked long enough I might discern some sort of structure underlying the flow of carnage. I strongly suspected that I would no longer be sane as humans measure sanity if I did.

I race through the corridors, listening to the chatter of small pockets of our troops who have been cut off. They are surprised to find the tables turned on them. They are having difficulty in understanding that they are no longer the hunters but the hunted. They pay for their lack of swift understanding with their lives.

I bound along the corridor, using ceiling and walls as easily as floor, scouting ahead of my own troops, keen to get off the ship and begin cleansing the universe of these human vermin.

Even as I do so, I sense the presence of humans ahead of me, moving to close the gap. I smile. The human commander misses nothing. He must be supervising the battle as closely as I. He realises that things have turned, although I wonder if he realises why.

Up ahead I suddenly see a massive wall of armed men. It looks like I underestimated my foe. The force we had been fighting had been merely there to slow us down, while he assembled a small army to cut us off. The humans are flooding into the area where our ship had penetrated theirs. We are going to have to battle our way through. I speed forward into the fray.

I aim a shot at the approaching humans, killing one. I dive into their midst, cartwheeling, kicking, slashing and shooting. The human leader may have planned for victory but he could not have planned for me. I unleash the full fury of my attack, in a way I so seldom do. A smile twists my lips as I

bound among my targets, slaying every one with a stroke. Now is no time for artistry. We are mere minutes away from this ship making its jump. If we are to get away we must do so soon.

The remnants of my bodyguard smash into the human lines behind me. I have left very little for them to do. They merely have to kill the few humans that somehow squirmed beyond my reach. They do this with pleasure. Some of them are laughing. I wonder whether it is mirth or simply relief that they think we will be able to escape this craft before it makes the leap into the forbidden realms.

We fit ourselves into place as the boarding craft pulls away. Through the portholes I can see bodies being blown out into space as the air rushes into the vacuum, flesh already chilling. Some of the humans are still alive although not for much longer. I glance around and notice that we have some human faces among us. It seems some of my warriors have taken captives after all.

I am not as displeased as I ought to be. I am curious about the human who led this army. I have a few questions for them before they die.

And then suddenly it reached a climax. We advanced on the enemy. A horde of howling Guardsmen emerged from the side corridors, killing as they came. The eldar were suddenly caught between the hammer and the anvil.

Macharius had deployed our troops in such a way as to cut most of the eldar off from the hull breach they had been retreating towards. The corridors were packed with armed men, bristling with a density of weapons that was too much even for the xenos. Fast as they were they could not dodge every las-beam, there were simply too many of them; as well to try to dodge drops of rain in a typhoon. I think that then, at last, the eldar realised what had happened. I am not sure that even then they believed it. They seemed baffled.

Not that it mattered.

When they saw they could not escape they turned on us with a redoubled fury. Something had driven them to a frenzy of suicidal ferocity. The surviving eldar punched backwards towards us with the fury of daemons who know they are going to be destroyed and are determined to take as many victims to hell with them as they can. They came at us in great

leaping bounds, weapons blasting, killing or crippling a man with every shot. Even then, at the last extremity, some of them could not resist causing pain rather than killing.

They charged across a junction, got caught in crossfire from both sides as well as from behind and from our position. It was a density of fire that Macharius had arranged. There was no way they could move through that blizzard of las-bolts without being hit. Their armour blistered and peeled and ran. They kept moving anyway, slowed perhaps by pain, but still determined to rampage and kill.

One reached us, slashing out with its long circular blades. It was shot in a dozen places, its beautiful, chitinous armour cracked and blistered. Its movements were slower than they had been but still almost too swift to follow. Macharius killed it with a blow and met its companion chainsword to blade. The teeth of his weapon screeched on the eldar's carapace and one of those long inhuman limbs flew in a different direction from the body it had been attached to. The fallen eldar still stabbed a Guardsman, the reflexive killing stroke of a dying sand-scorpion. The man went down. I stepped away. It kept trying to roll closer, all grace gone, just a furious daemonic engine of death.

Anton blasted it with his sniper rifle, sending a heavy calibre slug right through the visor of the helmet. Even then it did not stop flailing its limbs until heartbeats later. Even in death it tried to claim another victim.

More eldar slammed into us, close combat weapons slashing at our men. Again blood spurted, bone was revealed, part of a lung flopped out from a ribcage that had been somehow sheared in two. I aimed the shotgun and pulled the trigger but my target simply was not there. In the time it had taken me to aim and pull the trigger it had sprung out of my line of fire and my shell passed beneath. A moment later it was poised in front of me. All I saw of its strike was a blur. I knew in that moment my death was on me.

I flinched, but the blow never connected. Macharius's blade intercepted it. The eldar sprang back too fast for me to react but not too fast for the general. He followed it with a spring just as swift, and the xenos desperately tried to defend itself from a predator even more lethal than itself.

A second eldar was cleaving its way through our ranks when suddenly a bolt of strange lightning struck it, melting its helmet. A second later, Macharius had stepped forward, chainsword in hand. There was a raucous

screeching as the xenos's armour gave way under the force of the impact. I noticed that Drake was standing behind Macharius then; it had been his psionic bolt that had taken the eldar down.

I took a quick glance around, looking for the last surviving eldar. It had realised what was going on now and was fleeing as fast as it could, moving swiftly through a glittering net of las-bolts, somehow managing to avoid the bulk of them while its armour shimmered and ran from the effects of the few that connected. Anton raised his sniper rifle and sighted. His shot smashed into the eldar and it tumbled, still graceful, but hurt now. When it rose to its feet, some of its eerie grace had been leached away. Anton fired again and this time his shot hammered into its head. It fell flat. Some of us ran towards it.

'Wait,' said Macharius, his words coming out somewhere between a snarl and a shout. The men who had been moving forward, led by Ivan, stopped and the Lord High Commander advanced. Once he was within reach the eldar struck, still almost too swift for the eye to follow. Macharius stepped to one side and decapitated it. I realised that the xenos, heavily wounded as it was, had been playing dead, hoping for some of us to come within reach so that it could take more victims with it. It would most likely have succeeded if Macharius had not been there.

I think they were overconfident those eldar, or we would have taken more casualties than we did. It seemed that not one of the Guardsmen wounded, no matter how lightly they were scratched, had survived. Macharius inspected the sword. A look of contempt flickered across his face.

'Neurotoxins on the weapons,' Macharius said. 'Kill you painfully. Very painfully.'

I looked around and suddenly it was silent, one of those eerie moments you sometimes get on all battlefields, when just for an instant, by some strange coincidence, there are no weapons being fired, no screams echoing, no battle-cries pounding in your ears. The silence itself hisses and you are aware of your heart pounding and the taste of bile in your mouth, and you look around at your companions and you realise that they are all as pale-faced and wide-eyed as you, with that strange unblinking stare that the survivors always get when the thunder of battle has passed overhead and is gone.

It lasted only a few seconds and then everyone started to cheer, a release of

tension that went on until we started to count the cost.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVEN

Reports kept coming in. I could tell just from what Macharius was saying that we had taken heavy casualties, but it looked as though the ship was clear of eldar. Their attack had failed. It had cost thousands of lives from among our own troops, and the Emperor alone knew how many tens of thousands from among the crew of the ship, but the eldar were gone, driven off.

Warning klaxons blared.

'What now?' Anton asked, still so high on the fury of battle that he forgot how close Macharius was.

'We are about to make the jump,' Macharius said. 'The ship is being made ready.'

'Sir, there are huge bloody holes in the hull where the eldar came through.'

'The emergency bulkheads have been sealed and the screens are being ramped up to the maximum. It's all we can do. It's either make the jump or let the xenos blast us out of space.' He smiled grimly. 'I don't think they will be inclined to spare us after the bloody nose we have just given them.'

It was too late to abort the warp jump even if he had given the order. The ship was already starting to shudder and vibrate, and I had the strange falling sensation I always got when we passed through into the warp.

I give the order to attack. Our ships swarm on the human craft, but it resists the fury of our assault. I order our ships to aim for any vulnerable point they

can find, hoping to take out its drives. The human vessel smashes through the storm of fire and keeps accelerating. Its shields shimmer as it prepares to make its insane leap into the beyond. It occurs to me that we would, perhaps, be doing them a favour by destroying them, that instant death might prove to be a mercy compared to what may happen to them next.

I dismiss the thought. They may well survive – who knows what the probabilities are? No eldar has ever made a survey of them, but enough human ships move between the worlds to suggest that the odds are in favour of their madness, at least in the short term.

I wonder if there are any of my warriors still alive on board. My sensors say no, but there is always the possibility of error. I try to imagine what it would be like to be still aboard that ship as it crashed towards the forbidden. I wonder, do the humans really know what they are doing, entering a realm where the most evil beings in creation or below it lurk?

We begin another attack run. It may just be possible to cripple or destroy them before they make the jump. There is a certain pleasure to be gained from that.

We race closer again. The human weapons blast out at us but we are too swift for them, although evasive action slows our approach.

'We will make it, Lord Ashterioth,' Jalmek says.

'Would you care to wager on that?' I say. I am no longer convinced. Whoever is on board that ship has luck on his side, at least for today. Luck is always a fickle mistress, careless of whom she bestows her favours upon and when she withdraws them. Something tells me that today she smiles on my foe.

Jalmek looks at me. He has long ago learned the unwisdom of wagering against me. 'I think not, sire.'

Nonetheless, he continues to give a stream of orders and course corrections designed to put us into attack position and, just for a moment, at the end of a long twisting and snaking run, I think he has done it.

'Torpedo away,' he says, and our vessel spits out the missile and sends it streaking towards our intended target.

At the moment of impact there is a blinding flash, so dazzling that the viewer turns shadowy as it filters the coruscating energies we are witnessing.

When I look again, the human ship is gone.

‘We destroyed it, sire,’ said Jalmek. I can tell he is wishing he had made that bet now. I study the space where the human ship was and I am not sure if he is right.

Once again the lights flickered. Once again there was a hideous sense of dizziness and nausea, as if I had suddenly fallen from a cliff into an infinite void. Near me some of the soldiers were being noisily sick. Men who had marched through the worst horrors the eldar had inflicted on us could not keep their food down now.

Everyone around me swayed; in the strobing warning lights their faces went from greenish and pale to red and bloody-looking and then back again. I leaned against a wall, supporting myself, trying to get a sense of what was happening. Fear filled my mind. We were making a jump with a ship that had been patched together after one failed flight and whose hull had been breached by the eldar. At any moment, I expected it to buckle, for all the daemons of the star-sailors’ ghost stories to start making themselves manifest. I stared at my companions as if any second they might be transformed into creatures of nightmare. Their features were oddly distorted.

Macharius stood there, glancing around him. ‘Take two minutes,’ he said. ‘Your bodies will adjust.’

After the battle was over Macharius went to inspect the wounded, for his presence among them was always a comfort. He found what I had been expecting, and I am sure what he had too, that there were far fewer of them than there ought to have been, and this was not good news.

A battle is a bloody affair but normally far more men take wounds than are killed outright. Often those wounds will kill far more of them than combat in the long run, but that is neither here nor there.

You expect to see mangled bodies and bleeding men. You expect to hear the cries of pain and see wounded warriors wrapped in red-stained bandages and splattered with synthi-flesh. It is simply the way things are. Only this time, it was not.

There were plenty of dead. There were plenty of mangled bodies. There were plenty of dying. Far too many, in fact. Almost all of those who had taken even the slightest wound from the eldar were passing away, slowly

and in great pain. A few were not, but there was no rhyme nor reason to it. It was as though the xenos had spared some victims on a whim.

Perhaps the poison on their weapons had run out, or perhaps it was something completely different. I just know that I have never seen so many wounded men who were so obviously going to die after any previous battle. And I had never seen so many bodies that had been mutilated in ways that showed a malicious intelligence at work. Even in the heat of battle, the eldar had taken time to work terrible harm on a selection of their victims.

Macharius's face was a mask. I knew he was furious. He was a man capable of great cruelty himself, but it was always in the service of something, the ideal of the Imperium he served. This was something else. It was a sign of sickness of soul somewhere. It was not the innocent malice of cats playing with rodents; it was calculated, the product of intelligences who had simply decided, for whatever reasons of their own, to cause as much pain as possible to whatever they encountered.

He stalked back towards his chambers, and we were silent, for he was wrathful.

The holding bay is crowded with prisoners and with warriors. The ranks of those who boarded the human ship are sadly depleted. Their armour is pitted and scarred in many places. Some are wounded and are receiving the ministrations of haemonculi.

All of them are glaring at me in a way they simply would not have done a few hours before. They can count the number of the missing as well as I can, and they blame me for the absence of every comrade who is not here. Each death is a mark against me, a signifier of failure. We have taken what they believe to be needless casualties fighting against our inferiors. I have, temporarily, lost the aura of invincibility that is so necessary for those who would lead the eldar. There is a sense of menace in the assembled gaze that I force myself to ignore. If my subordinates wish to challenge me, let them. I do not fear any of them.

I stare at the assembled humans and try to read the emotions on their faces. It is not easy. Their features are slack and witless, not mobile and expressive like eldar faces. Their small bestial eyes glare around with a mixture of fear and horror. I have switched off the translation engine for the time being so I can only hear the loathsome grunting that serves them as

speech.

‘Not the best of hauls,’ says Sileria. She looks smug, as most eldar do when contemplating another’s misfortune. I can tell she is measuring our losses against the number of slaves we have gained. In her mind, as in mine, the balance comes down heavily on the debit side. I wonder if she is contemplating a move against me while the warriors are disenchanted. ‘I wonder how much nutriment they will provide. Very little most likely.’

‘We shall not consume them… yet,’ I say. I glance around. I have got all of their attentions now. They are curious as to what I have in mind.

‘They do not look as though they would be much use for anything else,’ Sileria says.

‘I would question them,’ I say.

‘You wish to converse with these beasts?’ Sileria says, unable to keep the astonishment from her voice.

‘Yes, Sileria, I do,’ I say, and I let a little of the lash sound in my voice. It is time to remind all of them who rules here and why. ‘There was a human of unusual skill on that ship. Surely you noticed how they countered all of our attacks and prevented us from taking the prize. Or were you too busy sweating your way through the battle?’

Sileria looks huffy. She is not unaware of her lack of finesse in combat, but the accusation of sweating is the one that upsets her most. I can see she would challenge me if she dared, but she does not. A direct physical attack on my person could only end one way, and we both know it. She gradually relaxes as she realises that I am prepared for any assault she might make.

No, I think, if there is going to be any move against me by Sileria it will come indirectly through one of her many lovers, Bael perhaps, or as part of some cabal. She forces herself to smile, but it just makes her look petulant.

‘Also there is the matter of this… thing,’ I say, indicating the Space Marine artefact. ‘It is a device belonging to one of the human elites, but I saw none of them aboard. I am curious as to why it was there and to what use it may be put. It was obviously of some significance to them, perhaps part of their primitive religion.’

She looks at the clawed mechanical gauntlet with contempt. I can understand why. It looks primitive and ugly, but there is something about it that speaks to me. It is ancient, and an aura of something clings to it. ‘I do not see what possible interest it could hold to an eldar of your intellect,’ she

says, as if scoring a point.

Of course you don't, I think, and that is one reason why I am the leader here and you are not.

'The humans placed some value on it. It might prove useful as bait,' I say. A few of the warriors nod. This is the sort of thinking they understand. They are calming down a little now, but I can see that in every heart a desire for vengeance has been kindled. 'It may be the humans will return seeking it.'

'If they do we will make them regret it,' says Veldor.

'No doubt,' I say, letting a note of irony show in my voice. I gesture to one of the servants to bring me my flaying tools. It is time to start asking some questions. I open the casket and produce a curved flensing knife with a bulb of tomb-worm venom in its hilt. I turn to the nearest human, one who wears the over-elaborate garb of one of their leaders. I switch on the translation engine.

'You there,' I say. 'Come talk to me.'

Macharius looked at the Guardsman grim-faced, then he looked at the slab where the Fist had lain. Of the ancient artefact itself there was no sign.

'It is what?' he said. I think it was perhaps the first time I had ever really seen him lose control. In the past he had acted it for the benefit of an audience, but at that moment he looked genuinely shocked.

'It is gone,' said the Guardsman. He had the dazed, shocked look of one who had somehow against all odds survived an overwhelming attack by the eldar. 'The Fist of Demetrius is gone.'

I looked at the bodies of the dead. They were strewn everywhere, and they bore the markings of those who had died at the hands of the eldar. They had not gone cleanly into the Emperor's Light. Macharius's eyes narrowed. He walked over to the last resting place of the Fist and stared in, as though he could not quite believe it was gone, despite the evidence of his own eyes.

'I want the ship searched,' he said. 'Every compartment. Make sure the Fist is not still aboard.'

Drake looked at him askance. 'The eldar were here. It seems logical that they took it.'

Macharius nodded. 'But we cannot just assume it. I want every avenue explored.' Sailors and soldiers alike ran to carry out his orders, leaving only

the two great men and their bodyguards alone in the chamber.

Macharius's fist clenched. He spoke with controlled anger. 'I want the Fist found.'

'We only just escaped the eldar,' said Drake, not unreasonably. 'We are lucky to get away with our lives.'

'Nonetheless, I will have it returned. I do not wish to see a sacred relic of humanity left in the hands of those xenos.'

'That is understandable,' said Drake. 'We put an enormous amount of effort into locating it. We spent lives recovering it. And if it is what we believe it to be then they cannot be allowed to have it.'

There was something else in the air here, hovering between them. I could sense it.

'The meeting should be happening soon,' said Macharius.

'If Sejanus managed things properly,' said Drake.

'Sejanus knew what to say. He will do what needs to be done.'

'We both know that the Adeptus Astartes are unpredictable and those ones most of all,' said Drake. 'Who knows how they will respond to your overtures? I would not care to predict that myself.'

Macharius smiled. It was a bleak expression. 'You still do not approve of this course of action, my friend.'

'It is a gamble that might be misinterpreted by those who watch over us.'

'I have considered that,' said Macharius.

'I don't doubt it. You consider everything.'

'But… I hear a but in your voice.'

'Imperial politics is not a battlefield, Lord High Commander,' said Drake. 'On the field of battle you are all but invincible. This is something else.'

Macharius looked around. There was something conspiratorial in their manner now. I felt this was something they had talked about in private during those long enclosed sessions with no one else present. What had they been discussing, I often wondered – the most powerful man in the galaxy and the inquisitor who had taken upon himself the role of counsellor and spiritual advisor. They were in the process of reforging an Imperium shattered by schism and civil war, of reclaiming thousands of worlds that had fallen from the Emperor's Light.

The faces of those the eldar had killed stared at us empty-eyed. I wondered about the place the Fist of Demetrius might have in Macharius's plans, and

how they might be affected by its disappearance. Judging by Macharius's expression, the answer was not good.

Replete, I look at the mess of bodies on the tables. The interrogation was a surprisingly satisfactory experience. It gives me a simple pleasure to exercise my skills even on such beasts as these. And, of course, as part of the experience, they talked, willingly answering all of the questions I put to them. Not many can resist the flaying knife or the eye-gougers when they are wielded by an expert such as myself. Most of them would have talked willingly enough when they saw what happened to the first of them, but I see no reason to deny myself the small pleasures in life.

I consider what they have told me. I have a name for my foe now, Macharius. It seems to me that I have heard that name before in other places. He is the human associated with this new tribal migration they have under way. He is their leader. I am pleased with this knowledge. This Macharius is exceptional by the standards of the humans, a beast with an innate gift for warfare almost worthy of an eldar, one with a talent such as might emerge every hundred generations. It does not make my failure sting any less, but it does explain it.

Perhaps more interesting is what they told me about the artefact. It appears it is sacred to the humans. One of them, better informed than the rest, told me that it may have belonged to one of the ancient saints or primarchs, or whatever the humans call their primitive heroes. It is not the first time I have come across references to this Leman Russ. He is revered as the founding father of their Space Wolves tribe. Such beings were said to be gifted with near godlike powers. It comes to me that if this is truly the case, it is well worth investigating. I doubt it will come to anything but there was once a time when the humans were far more advanced than they are today, and it may be that analysis of the genetic helix will reveal something worthwhile. I am not hopeful, but it is an avenue worth exploring.

In any case, I have learned all there is to learn from the primitives and can return to our new base to continue my investigations. I have a foreboding that the humans will return. It seems this Macharius made considerable efforts to obtain the Fist. He will most likely do so again, if he survives.

That would be good. I would welcome a chance to humble him. Our defences must be made ready.

We waited tensely. We hoped and we prayed to the Emperor. The crew did a little more than that. They moved around the ship, reinforcing the bulkheads and checking all of the areas around the eldar breakthrough zones. Macharius had sentries stand guard with them. I don't know what he was expecting, perhaps for monsters to break through and take over the ship. My own fear was simply that the weak spots in the hull would give way and the stuff of the immaterium would come roaring in, or all our air would go roaring out, but I am an ignorant former factory worker from Belial and what do I know of the horrors we avoided?

I know that after the initial tense period of waiting after the jump we settled down into a parody of the usual shipboard routine, although we were more wary and more afraid even than usual. Macharius really did have the whole ship searched for the Fist and was disappointed to find that it was not aboard. After that he paced his chambers and studied star charts and planetary maps, but I could tell that he was disturbed. There were times when there was a tightness about his eyes and a grim twist to his lips that spoke of a controlled fury that only those of us who knew him very well would have noticed. At those times, we walked very quietly around him.

What could it be that was troubling him? I had seen Macharius sleep like a baby the night before a battle in which a million men died. I had watched him smile when we were surrounded and outnumbered by a thousand to one. Why had the loss of this one ancient artefact upset him so?

Granted it might have been a sacred relic of the time when the Emperor had walked among men – but we had seen no evidence of it. It had worked no wonders in our presence. We had marched triumphantly through the galaxy without it, and I fully expected to march triumphantly again. Macharius did not need sacred artefacts to march behind. He was his own banner and his own guarantee of victory. He had won every war he had fought. Still there was an unease in him, as if he sensed forces gathering against him, unseen as yet but coming. He was a man who liked to prepare for all contingencies, was Macharius, but what contingency was he planning for now? And why had Drake mentioned the Adeptus Astartes?

I pushed such thoughts to one side. The answers would become clear in time, I felt sure. And so we emerged from the second leg of our ill-fated jump. This time we arrived at our intended destination, Emperor's Glory.

‘You refuse to aid me?’ Macharius said.

‘I do,’ said the fleet admiral. ‘With a heavy heart, but I do.’

As soon as we arrived in the Emperor’s Glory system Macharius started making preparations to reclaim the Fist. He spoke to the fleet admiral in orbit over the new capital of the crusade on the vox-channels, but it seemed others had already been in touch with that august personage.

‘Why?’

‘I have spoken with your Navigator and his brethren in the fleet. They all believe that Procrastes, the system you escaped from, is unreachable at this moment in time.’

‘I see,’ said Macharius. He stared at the admiral. If he had looked at me in that way I would have acquiesced to his requests, but Fleet Admiral Kellerman was made of sterner stuff.

‘I do not rule out sending the fleet there in the future. It is just that now is too risky. To send any of our ships into the jaws of that storm would be to place them at unacceptable odds of loss. Once the storm dies down that will no longer be the case.’

‘Tell me, admiral,’ said Macharius. ‘How long can these storms last?’ It was clear that Macharius already had a clear idea of the answer. He merely wanted the other man to be on record.

‘They can last for decades, Lord High Commander,’ said Kellerman. ‘I would not get my hopes up about this happening any time soon.’

‘Thank you, admiral,’ said Macharius and cut the connection. He turned to Drake and said, ‘It seems the Navy is being obstructive.’

Drake studied him coolly. ‘I think he merely told you something you did not want to hear.’

Macharius shrugged. ‘That he did, but nonetheless, I suspect he is being deliberately obstructive.’

‘He would not be the first Navy commander to be so,’ said Drake, who obviously did not want to argue the point. He had chosen a more subtle line of defence.

‘This has been happening more and more lately,’ Macharius said.

‘A man in your position generates enemies,’ said Drake. ‘It is inevitable. I warned you about antagonising the magnates. I warned you that the lords of the Administratum would start seeing you as a threat. It looks like the first moves against you have begun.’

‘I want the Fist reclaimed,’ said Macharius.

‘I strongly suspect you will need to do that without the Navy’s help.’

‘They are not the only people with ships,’ said Macharius.

‘You will need a warship, and a very powerful one, if you intend to return to Procrastes.’

‘I believe I know where I can find one,’ said Macharius.

‘I was afraid of that,’ said Drake.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHT

Emperor’s Glory looked exactly as you would expect such a world to look. The sky was clear and an astonishing shade of blue. The sun was bright and golden. Where there were no cities, the lands were as pristine as a park. The cities were studies in imposing beauty.

The buildings had gleaming marble facings, and gigantic statues of saints and Imperial heroes filled the streets. At least in the upper city everything was clean and gilded and perfect looking. The people were richly dressed. Perhaps in the undercity, things were different, but we had not yet had either the opportunity or the desire to look. It was beyond a shadow of a doubt the richest planet I had visited, and it was getting richer by the day.

A fantastic stream of wealth swept in, borne on the tides of war. The spoils of a hundred worlds and a thousand ongoing campaigns were stored in great warehouses, piled in the halls of palaces, worn on the scabbard belts and chestplates of victorious Imperial soldiers.

The world was the sector capital now, standing at the hub of a cosmic crossroads where the supply routes of the crusade met. Men and materials flowed in from the Imperium. Tribute and loot accumulated until it could be shipped back to the heart worlds. In the meantime, everyone of any importance was taking a tithe of it. I suspected that several new ruling dynasties would be funded by the profits of this war.

You could see the evidence of the wealth when you set down on the space-field. It was as big as a city and crammed with ships of every shape, size

and classification. Enormous warehouses lined the edges or lay beneath the blast pads of the landing zones. I watched one huge treasure argosy being unloaded as we marched down the ramp from the sub-orbital shuttle. I had seen several more through the portholes in the ship's side as we waited to disembark.

Emperor's Glory was the first world on which I had stood in a long time where the sky was blue, the sun was bright, the air was fresh and no one seemed all that keen to kill me. In the air at the space port, you could just smell the odd metallic tang I have come to associate with docked sub-orbital ships, a compound of cooling metal, drive ozone and recycled atmosphere being released from the locks to mingle with the local air as you emerged from the hatch.

I did not need my rebreather mask. Even after all this time, the fact that I could think that still stunned me. I was born on a hive-world, where pollution was everywhere in the sealed corridors of the city. The external air beyond the hive was even more deadly. The idea that there was a place where you did not need to make sure your protective filter-mask was always available was still little short of miraculous to me. I could tell from looking at Ivan and Anton and the way they looked around with wonder that they felt the same way. Macharius just looked as if it were normal. His home world had most likely been like this. He certainly seemed at ease here.

A highly ornate airship descended on our landing zone. It was as big as a small orbital shuttle. and you could see that beneath all the gold-plating it was heavily armed and armoured. Even here in the new sector capital, seat of Macharius's power in these conquered worlds, no one except the general himself was taking any chances with his safety.

We went down the ramp ahead of Macharius, weapons drawn, as if we were making planetfall on some rebel world. It was mostly for show, of course, but it meant we kept in practice. Drake and his storm troopers followed us down the ramp.

From the airship a horde of attaches and executive officers emerged, all moving towards Macharius, all carrying reports and petitions and missives that must be delivered only by hand. They swarmed together, almost elbowing each other out of the way as they moved forward. We stood our ground as they came towards us like charging orks.

They appeared almost surprised that common soldiers would not get out of

their way. We had done this before.

'Make way for the Lord High Commander,' the Undertaker said, in his flat, strange voice, and they halted. Almost any sane man would when confronted by his vacuum-empty eyes and emotionless manner. 'He will speak to you in order of rank when he reaches the palace. Now stand aside and do not obstruct the Emperor's business.'

His manner made it quite clear that he meant what he said. It seemed perfectly possible that he would order us to shoot if these office boys did not get out of our way. They sensed it too and our way parted. They fell into line and followed us back onto the airship, though. I could already see them jockeying for position, claiming precedence, forming small cabals and alliances.

Suddenly I missed the cold violence of the war front.

The palace that Macharius was building would be one of the wonders of the sector when it was complete. So much was obvious as we made our approach. It was the size of a small city, built in a shape that suggested the aquila when seen from overhead. Hundreds of thousands of workmen swarmed over the sides of the structure: painting, sculpting statues and gargoyles, working on the enormous victory masks of Macharius worked into the walls.

Once, I had walked across a completed section of one of the roofs. There were hundreds of statues of Imperial angels there, regiments of them, ready to storm heaven at Macharius's command. It had seemed to me to be a colossal waste. I was probably the only person who had looked upon them since the sculptors had departed for a new sector of the palace. I might well be the only person to do so until the end of time. Yet someone had seen fit to order them built. I wondered if it was some bureaucrat growing fat on contractor's bribes, or an architect swollen with megalomania from being commissioned to build this monument to one man.

I wondered about all of it sometimes. What made Macharius sanction the construction of such a monument to his vanity? He was already the most famous man in the Imperium save the Emperor. His name would ring down the millennia for as long as mankind endured. What did erecting this titanic palace add to its lustre?

It was indicative, though, that something monstrously proud was growing

within the Lord High Commander, something that needed this confirmation in plascrete and ceramite of his importance. Or perhaps I do him a disservice. Perhaps it was being built because that is what was expected of him. He was hardly the first Imperial commander, or indeed the first great conqueror, to leave monuments littered about the galaxy. I doubt that he will be the last.

Still, it made me uncomfortable as the airship swung in towards the landing tower and made its final approach. Beneath us I could see the great geodesic dome of the Hunting Grounds. It was full of exotic jungle plants and great carnivores brought from across the sector to provide sport for Macharius and his chosen guests. It was a place of death and danger, as I would find out for myself one day.

'Gentlemen, you are dismissed for the moment,' said Macharius as we stepped across the threshold of the palace. A new detachment of his personal guard stood ready to greet him. They were spotlessly garbed in their green lion's head tunics, drawn up as if for review.

The words were spoken with a pleasant, comradely smile, and their tone made it clear that he valued us greatly. I felt almost embarrassed by the thoughts I had been having about him just a few minutes ago on the airship. We stood at attention, though, until he was gone and Inquisitor Drake with him. After that, the Undertaker said, 'You're not on duty any more. There's no need to just stand there.' Taking himself at his word he strode off into the palace. The bodyguard split off into small groups and I was left standing with Anton and Ivan.

'How is the arm?' Anton asked, slapping it roughly.

'Better,' I said, 'or you would be spitting teeth right now.'

'Where are you going to get ten extra men in a hurry?' Anton said.

'Is that how much help you think you'd need?' I asked.

'No. I meant you would need them to…' His words trailed off as he realised what he was saying. He let out a long sigh, then stared off into the distance, back in the direction of the airship. Servitors were already starting to unload huge trunks full of plunder and wargear.

People in the green tunics of palace servants lounged nearby. They watched us, just as they had watched Macharius depart. 'How many of those guys are spies, do you think?' Ivan asked. His voice sounded slightly

better since his mechanical parts had been upgraded, but it could still not remotely be described as normal.

‘All of them,’ Anton said. ‘That’s what Lady Patricia says.’ Lady Patricia was his latest flame. A highborn lady from Emperor’s Glory.

‘She would know since she’s one herself,’ Ivan said.

‘No, she’s not,’ said Anton, a little too quickly.

‘Yeah, she would tell you if she was,’ Ivan said.

‘She’s not.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘She’s just interested in your good looks and personal charm.’

‘That’s right,’ said Anton.

‘Funny that,’ said Ivan. ‘Since you don’t have any.’

‘Look who’s talking,’ said Anton.

‘So before you became Macharius’s bodyguard, how many highborn ladies threw themselves at you?’ I asked.

‘I think we all know the answer to that,’ said Ivan.

‘I had a few,’ Anton said.

‘I don’t remember any,’ I said.

‘I don’t think you’re in any position to criticise me,’ said Anton. ‘I’m not the one who fell into bed with an Imperial assassin.’

‘Hush!’ I said. I always regretted the drunken time I had told the pair of them about my involvement with Anna, back on Karsk. ‘That’s the sort of fool statement that could get you killed. It could get all of us killed.’

I smiled as though I were making a joke and I kept my tone very light, but I was looking around to see who was listening. Nobody seemed to be, but, of course, that meant nothing. All of these people were adroit at appearing to notice nothing while noticing everything, and that was not taking into account the possibility of all manner of technological eavesdropping devices being focused on us. The very powerful found it useful to keep even such minor members of Macharius’s retinue as us under surveillance. After all, you never knew when someone like Anton would let something slip they shouldn’t. Someone like me too, I suppose.

Even Anton had the good grace to look abashed. He had learned something in our time with Macharius after all. He considered his words for a while and said, ‘Look, I know what the Lady Patricia sees in me.’

‘Nothing,’ Ivan suggested, a little cruelly under the circumstances.

Anton continued with an air of mock dignity, as though he had not been interrupted. ‘But you’ve got to remember, I am using her as much as she is using me. How often does a common soldier like me get to bed down with a highborn bedroom acrobat like her?’

‘She teaching you some new tricks, is she?’ I asked.

‘I am teaching her some, actually. Anyway, I don’t tell her anything she does not already know.’

‘How do you know what she knows?’ Ivan asked. He looked quite genuinely curious.

‘She tells me.’

‘And no woman has ever lied to you,’ I said.

‘You leave me to worry about that. You worry about your own women. I suspect you’re in much more trouble than me.’ He reached out and picked a goblet from a tray being carried by a passing servant girl, swigged a mouthful of the yellowish nectar in it and walked on. He did it as though it were his right, which it was. Everything was available to one of Macharius’s bodyguards within the palace, and I do mean everything. It was a life of staggering luxury compared to the one which we had grown up with on Belial. In this palace, even common soldiers like us could live like merchant princes on our home world. It was one of the advantages of being there.

Anton let out a sudden loud whoop that had everyone looking at him, including Ivan and me. He just grinned his idiot grin and said, ‘Did you ever think we would be living like this, lads?’

It was infectious. I found myself grinning back. ‘No,’ I said.

‘Best thing that ever happened to us was running into Macharius,’ Anton said. He believed that right till the end.

My chambers were in the same sector of the palace as Macharius had his. They resembled what I had always imagined luxury to look like, until I caught sight of the way the generals lived. It was not a barracks room. It was a suite with a living room and a massive four-poster bed in the centre. There was a naked woman in mine when I entered. I recognised her too. ‘Anna,’ I said. It was not her real name, of course. I never found out what that was. It was the first one I had known her by, though, all those years ago on Karsk. It is the name I still think of her by now.

‘Leo,’ she said. She was a good-looking woman, no doubt of that: compactly built, hair very short, large, deceptively trusting eyes. Her beauty could not be compared to the striking, surgically enhanced glamour of the local noblewomen – she would barely have been noticed among them, which was the whole point, of course – but she was lovely. Her face was the same today as it had been when I first met her. It did not have to be, she could change it as she liked, but she knew I had a sentimental attachment to that look. Maybe she did too.

On the dresser beside her sat a large, custom-made pistol. I had no doubt there were half a dozen other weapons within easy reach. She was not a woman who ever entered a room without being prepared to fight her way out of it. ‘I saw the reports that said you were back in one piece.’

I very carefully unbuckled my belt and placed my holstered sidearm on top of the chest of drawers. Her reflexes were much faster than mine. She was much stronger too. Somewhere, sometime, the strange archeotech of the ancients had been used on her, transforming her into something other than human.

No, let me rephrase that. She was still a human. If she had not been, our lords and masters in the Imperium would have terminated her. She was an augmented human in the same way that Ivan was, although she had been changed in ways invisible to the naked eye and with much greater sophistication.

‘I confess, I am surprised to find you here,’ I said.

‘No, you’re not,’ she said. She tilted her head to one side. ‘You expected that we would meet again. We always do.’

There was some truth in that. I did expect to meet her at unusual times and in unusual places. We had encountered each other off and on a dozen times since the start of the crusade. We had occasionally been lovers. I suspected it was part of her job to keep tabs on Macharius’s security contingent, but I like to think there was something more to it as well, that it was within the realms of possibility that she liked me.

‘Why is that exactly?’ I asked.

‘You know why,’ she said.

‘Apparently I have hidden the knowledge from myself.’

‘I am here to question you, to pick your brains.’

‘I thought it was because you find me attractive.’ She smiled with genuine

amusement.

‘You see, you did know the reason after all.’

‘I find that hard to believe.’

‘I both like you and find you attractive, and I am still here to pick your brains.’

‘And that works better while you are naked,’ I said, sliding onto the bed beside her.

‘I thought we might amuse ourselves before I interrogated you,’ she said, kissing me. I ran my hands over her flesh. There were areas beneath the skin that were harder and heavier than they ought to have been. She was still very lovely.

Afterwards we lay on the bed. She studied me, head tilted to one side, cat-like. ‘What are you thinking?’ she asked, reaching out to touch my cheek.

‘I am still wondering why you are here?’

‘You are not the soul of romance, Leo.’

‘Nor are you. Let us not pretend otherwise.’

She shrugged and her face was for once mask-like. It was most unlike her.

‘Is someone going to die?’ I asked.

‘You know I would not tell you even if someone was.’

‘No. You would just leave me to find the bodies, like on Masara.’

‘You are still angry about that, I see.’

It was difficult to keep the anger out of my voice, even with this very dangerous woman, who could read me all too easily. ‘You killed two officers in Macharius’s guard.’

‘They were in the pay of the Autocrat of Absalom,’ she said. ‘They felt they had been overlooked for promotion and that their honour had been insulted.’

‘I know. We found convincing evidence of that afterwards. Very convincing.’

‘Too convincing is what you were going to say, Leo.’ She held my gaze steadily.

‘Can there be such a thing as evidence that is too convincing?’ I said.

‘Sometimes things need to be spelled out in such a way as there is absolutely no doubt. Particularly when the criminals are well connected, with relatives who have considerable influence in the high councils of

humanity.’

‘This was spelled out in such a way that a child could have no doubts about it. Diaries, journals, letters, decrypted communications protocols, all pointing in only one direction.’

‘All of them authentic,’ she said. I rose from the bed and turned my back to her. If she was going to kill me I would not have been able to stop her anyway, and I did not want her to be able to look at my face and read my expression.

‘I can read the tension patterns of the muscle groups in your back as easily as I can read your facial expressions, Leo,’ she said, as if she knew what I were thinking, which I suppose she did. ‘It is one of the things I was trained to do.’

‘What is going on?’ I asked, turning to face her again.

‘I am here to be certain things go as they should with Macharius.’

‘He is still alive and the crusade rolls on,’ I said.

‘There are those who want him dead,’ she said.

‘Heretics have tried to kill him before. He is still here.’

‘It’s not just heretics, Leo. There are those in the Administratum who wish to see him fail.’

‘Why would they want that? He has added more worlds to the Imperium than any man since the time of the Emperor.’

‘Precisely because that is so.’

‘What?’ I turned to look at her.

‘Powerful men make powerful enemies, Leo, and Macharius is the most powerful man in the galaxy at the moment, with the exception of the one who sits in the Golden Throne on Terra.’ Her voice was flat but still she managed to communicate a surprising amount of reverence when she mentioned the occupant of the Throne. ‘There are some who fear what he might do with that power, now that he has accumulated so much of it.’

‘Macharius is a loyal servant of the Emperor,’ I said.

She shook her head almost pityingly. Her voice was very soft. ‘Leo, Leo, Leo.’

‘He is.’

‘I do not doubt it for a moment, but it is not me he has to convince. Macharius makes enemies just by being who he is. He demands efficiencies in the supply chain for his armies, that arms and supplies appear where they

should when they should and with the minimum of spoilage.’

‘What is wrong with that? It is merely sound generalship.’

‘The wealth of merchant dynasties has been built on making sure those supply chains are not efficient. What Macharius sees as inefficiency, powerful men see as sources of revenue.’

‘Powerful, corrupt men,’ I said.

‘I do not disagree. The word to place the emphasis on is powerful, with money to spend and friends in high places. And Macharius is giving even the High Lords reasons to mistrust him.’

‘Really?’

‘He has been reaching out to the Adeptus Astartes in subtle ways. That is not something the Imperium encourages in its generals. It likes its various military arms to be separate.’

I thought about the Fist and the potential uses Macharius might have for it, and all the time I was aware of Anna studying me. Doubtless she was learning one of the things she had come to learn. ‘Why are you telling me this?’

‘Because you are part of his bodyguard, and you will be in the line of fire when his enemies move against him.’

‘They would be foolish to do that if he is as powerful as you say. He could crush them with ease.’

‘He would be fighting with shadows. Macharius has one sort of power, they have another.’

‘I think you will find that Macharius is adept at all the uses of power.’

‘No doubt, but so are his enemies. It may be possible for them to find those among Macharius’s followers who would replace him. They have armies too, great warlords whose soldiers are loyal unto them.’

‘They would never turn against Macharius.’

‘The same was once said of the Emperor himself. His greatest generals rebelled against him.’

‘That is close to blasphemy, Anna.’

‘Have I shocked you, Leo? Are you going to report me to the inquisitor?’ Her smile was mocking.

‘You already know the answer.’

‘I could report you for not doing so.’

‘There are many things you could have reported me for. You have yet to do

so.’

Her smile turned pleasant. ‘I am serious, Leo. Some of Macharius’s own generals will be encouraged to plot against him. Perhaps it is already happening.’

‘Why would they do that?’

‘You are not so naive, Leo. You have seen some of these men up close. They are great generals in their own right. They too wish to write their names in the Imperial histories. Right now, they are merely moons reflecting Macharius’s solar glory. If Macharius were gone…’

She let the words hang in the air and I could see she really was serious.

‘You want me to tell him this.’

‘He already knows. Macharius is not a stupid man, and as you have pointed out he understands the uses of all kinds of power. He also understands men who are motivated by glory. How could he not? He is first among them.’

‘I sometimes think you do not like the Lord High Commander.’

‘It does not matter whether I like him, Leo. It matters whether I serve him.’

She was a woman with a very firm grasp on what was important, was Anna, and had a gift for the precise use of words, as I was to find out.

‘I do like him,’ I said. I was surprised to hear myself saying that.

‘It is in your self-interest to,’ she said.

‘I would like him anyway, even if it were not.’

‘You have an unswerving loyalty, you and your friends, I envy you that.’

‘And you don’t?’

‘I am loyal only to the Emperor.’ She said this very distinctly, as if giving a fair warning.

‘Does He give you His orders directly?’

‘I am loyal to what he represents.’ We were looking at each other warily now. I was not quite sure why she was telling me this. Perhaps she wanted me to understand finally at the end of things, and perhaps I did when it came. ‘You are too.’

And then as sudden as a summer squall on the sea of storms, her mood changed. ‘Do you remember Xenophon?’

I nodded.

‘I remember the islands and the beaches,’ I said. It blazed in my memory,

bright with sunshine. I remembered giving her some seashells I had collected. They were polished to a sheen by the action of wave and sand. I wondered whether she still had them or whether they had been dumped along with all the other detritus of her life when she travelled.

‘Me too,’ she said. ‘I was happy there.’

She said it as if happiness were a concept that she did not quite understand, a strange intrusion from somewhere alien, a wonder which she still needed to try and grasp.

‘You will be guarding Macharius during his triumphal procession?’ she said.

‘Yes.’

‘Be very careful, Leo,’ she said. ‘I would hate to see any harm come to you.’

I looked at her. I almost reached out but she was already in motion, rising from the bed, garbing herself in her robe. She dressed with grace and speed and no wasted effort, but when she stopped she was suddenly as clumsy as anyone else, wearing normality as a disguise, hiding what she was by pretending to be one of us, pretending to be only human.

She was good at that, as she was at anything she put her mind to. What she was best at was deception.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINE

‘As ever, Helicon Blight is at your service, your excellency,’ the rogue trader said as he bowed to Macharius. I studied him closely. He was a tall, spare-looking man with a lined, sunburned face, craggy features and a sprinkle of grey in his hair. His clothing was of the finest fabrics, but it was not local manufacture. It was from some distant system still far outside the scope of the crusade, a reminder that not so long ago these worlds had been outwith the remit of the Imperium, and that we were still very close to the new frontier. Rogue traders were among the few citizens licensed to trade beyond its borders. They had other reasons for existing as well.

I knew Blight for an ambitious man and a spy. I had seen him reporting to Macharius in private on multiple occasions over the past decade, whenever he returned from one of his trading trips. His eyes were like chips of blue ice, and they stayed focused totally on Macharius as if they could divine the future by the study of the expression on his face.

‘Can you help me, Blight?’ Macharius asked. There was no sign of the eagerness he had shown about this matter in his discussions with Drake. He was once again a cold, calm Imperial general. ‘I wish very much to return to Procrastes and free its inhabitants from the scourge of these xenos.’

‘From what you have told me, it is a tricky passage, Lord High Commander,’ said Helicon Blight. ‘The fact that Admiral Kellerman flatly refuses to order his fleet to do as you have requested confirms that.’

Behind him, through a vast crystal dome, I caught sight of the blue

shimmering orb of Emperor's Glory. Blight sat in an ornate throne. He smoked some char-weed from a hookah. It was no way to greet an Imperial commander, but here on his own ship Blight was ranking and perhaps he wanted to make the point. Macharius did not seem in the slightest bit disturbed. 'The Procrastes system is between two of the great warp storms and there are constant chronal flux streams emerging from there that can easily pull a ship off course. As you have found out to your cost.'

Macharius raised an eyebrow. The merchant prince said, 'I am not haggling, Lord High Commander, nor telling you how difficult it is just to raise my fee. You know I am your man and would do this for nothing. I am telling you the way the thing truly lies.'

'Difficult then, not impossible,' said Macharius.

Blight took a puff on his hookah and offered the mouthpiece to Macharius. The general accepted it.

'Exactly so. With a sufficiently skilled Navigator we could make the passage, although I am not sure I would advise you to risk it. If I may be so bold, commission me to acquire what you seek and I will return with it or die in the attempt. My life is far less valuable to the Imperium than yours.'

'I have already made up my mind that I must personally supervise this operation.'

Blight shrugged as though the matter were settled. 'I would advise you to speak to Raymond Belisarius then. His kinswoman Zarah is in port now and is the most skilled Navigator in the sector. She also has some experience with those warp currents.'

'You do not feel your own Navigators could handle the matter? The less people who know of this the better.'

'I have every confidence in my people, but in cases such as this, with yourself as super-cargo, I would want the very best. Why risk anything else? Of course, it would cost the ransom of a planetary governor to hire her away from her present job.'

'I have the ransom of a thousand planetary governors,' said Macharius. 'Such questions are immaterial.'

'Very good then, sire. I will open negotiations with House Belisarius.'

'I wish to meet with them myself when you have concluded your arrangements.'

'That too can be arranged,' said Blight. 'Anything can, for a price.'

‘I will meet any price that is likely to be asked,’ said Macharius.

‘I do not doubt it, your excellency,’ said Blight. ‘I do not doubt it at all.’

There was something strange about being in the presence of a Navigator. The strangeness was magnified when there was two of them, but that was not what held all of our attentions. It was the man who was with them, standing immobile as a statue behind their thrones.

He was tall, taller by far even than Macharius, and very broad. His ceramite armour made him seem broader still. His eyes had a peculiar canine quality in the way they reflected the light. Long whiskers drooped from his lips, huge sideburns concealed half his face. In his hands he held a bolter I would have struggled to lift. For all the life he showed, he might well have been a statue, but you just knew that he could come explosively to life and kill everything in the room if he chose to. This was one of the Wolfblades, one of the legendary wardens of House Belisarius provided by the Space Wolves Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes. He was bodyguard to the Navigators just as I was to Macharius, but on his own he was probably a match for the score of us.

Raymond Belisarius was a thin man, with a long face and cold, watchful eyes. He had a scarf wrapped around his forehead that bore the sign of his House. It hid the mutated third eye that was the mark of the Navigator and which in his case was said to be hideous beyond belief. According to the dossiers, he was some sort of cripple as far as his House was concerned. His third eye did not function as it was supposed to and let him guide ships through the perils of the warp. Instead, he had other gifts: a tremendous understanding of the workings of finance and trade, and an astonishing insight into the corrupt workings of the human heart. He was not only in charge of his House’s business out here with the crusade, he was their spymaster and their chief merchant.

Like Blight, he had previously had dealings with Macharius. I had known the two of them to hunt together in the Great Dome in the palace. There were always times when they were apart from others and no one could overhear their discussions. Looking at the Wolfblade and knowing what I now did, I was beginning to have my suspicions about those talks.

Zarah Belisarius was a lovely, ethereal woman, who did not appear to be much older than twenty, although she was at least ten times that. Her face

was that of a tranquil saint, her form willowy rather than full. She studied Macharius in a way that showed a good deal of interest. I supposed he was used to it, being who he was and all.

‘Helicon Blight has told us of your request,’ said Raymond. His speech was formal and seemed entirely for the benefit of his cousin. I wondered how much the other members of his House knew about his dealings with Macharius. ‘He has not told us why you wish to go to this dangerous place.’

‘That is my business,’ said Macharius. ‘I am willing to pay a good deal of money to see that it stays that way.’

The Navigator nodded as though he understood. He ran one long, narrow finger along his thin lower lip then touched the dimple on his upper lip. ‘It is not just a question of money, it is a question of risk,’ he said. ‘We need to know what we may encounter when we get there in order to best decide whether to attempt it.’

Macharius looked at him, looked at the Wolfblade and then at Zarah. He smiled his most charming smile. ‘You know as much about the Procrastes system as I. I have given you the information we have. I wish to free those under the xenos yoke and return them to the Emperor’s Light. I will also avenge the insult of their attack on my ship. They stole something of great value to me and perhaps to people I wish to befriend.’ A flick of his eyes indicated the Wolfblade.

I was not surprised at how circumspect Macharius was being. Navigators had their own culture going back past the dawn of the Imperium, and Belisarius was one of the oldest of their Houses. They also had connections with the Space Wolves Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes dating back to the Great Crusade. ‘Are you interested, or should I take my business elsewhere?’ Macharius said.

‘Lord High Commander, it is up to my kinswoman. She may decide whether she wishes to take the contract or not.’ He looked at Zarah. She looked at Macharius.

‘I have some business to conclude here, and if I must break contract with my present employers then penalty clauses will be invoked and compensation called for.’

‘I will cover those,’ said Macharius.

‘Those will be at a premium, when the reasons are known,’ said Raymond.

‘Perhaps it would be best if the reasons were not public knowledge then,’

said Macharius. ‘Our association has been mutually beneficial in the past, and it would be wise on both our parts to ensure that it continues to be so.’

Macharius was giving a polite warning not to try extorting too much.

‘It shall be as you say, Lord High Commander.’

‘Good,’ said Macharius. ‘When can we expect to depart?’

Raymond looked at Zarah. She said, ‘One standard week if Helicon Blight’s ship is ready.’

‘Very good,’ said Macharius. ‘It means I have time to conduct business with my commanders.’

I could tell he was disappointed, though. He had wanted to depart immediately if he could.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TEN

The day was warm. The sun was shining, as it always was on Emperor's Glory, bringing another perfect day to a perfect world. The only things that looked out of place were the grim gunships standing on the plascrete of the space-field and the countless smaller commercial vessels coming and going.

Macharius stood on the landing ground. Inquisitor Drake was with him. They watched as enormous ramps were attached to the side of a massive military shuttle. They talked constantly, scoring points off each other with gusto. They were both clever men with strong views, and I think they saw such contests as a challenge, the way some people play regicide or spar against each other with wooden swords.

I listened to them as I watched our surroundings for threats. 'You need to be more tolerant of the failings of the Administratum,' Drake said. 'It is a great machine. It works very slowly, but it works.'

'My men's lives depend on getting the right supplies in the right place at the right time,' said Macharius. 'All armies depend on this as much as the courage and faith of our soldiers.'

'I would not presume to contradict you on such things,' said Drake. 'You know far more about them than I do.'

'On the other hand…' Macharius said. He knew that the inquisitor deferred to him only to set up another point.

'On the other hand, I do know about the way the Imperium is ruled. You cannot make demands of the people you make demands of. You cannot

threaten them the way you do. You cannot execute them for failing to meet your expectations. You must make them your allies.’

‘So my men must go without ammunition so some contractor can grow rich from graft? My tanks must go without fuel because of the incompetence of some placeman, whose relatives just happen to be high in the Administratum?’

‘Some would say your generals grow rich from the plunder of worlds,’ Drake said mildly. The fact that he could say such a thing while standing with Macharius and awaiting Sejanus said a lot about his power, his confidence and his familiarity with the general.

‘They have earned what they take with their blood and their courage.’

‘With the blood of the Emperor’s soldiers and the courage of the Emperor’s faithful,’ countered Drake. ‘Not to mention the products of the Emperor’s temple-factories and the wealth of the Emperor’s worlds.’

‘The Imperium gets its rightful tithe. The soldiers share in the spoils of victory.’

‘That is not the point,’ Drake said.

‘Then what is?’ Macharius countered.

‘Corruption is just a point of view. I could, if I chose to, see it in the way your generals dispose of the spoils of victory. Any fair-minded observer could. You choose to see it only where it works against you.’

‘I see it where it is.’

‘No doubt. And no doubt you are correct. How do you think your generals would feel if you purged them for taking the spoils you had previously awarded them?’

‘You are surely not trying to make a comparison between my generals and corrupt administrators?’

‘You have not answered my question,’ said Drake. ‘Would your generals support you with such enthusiasm? Would they perhaps think they were being persecuted unfairly?’

‘Would you stop asking rhetorical questions?’ Macharius’s voice was mocking, and he mimicked the inquisitor’s tone with uncanny precision.

‘Obviously they would not,’ said Drake, not in the least affected. ‘They would be upset. They would think it unfair if you changed the rules so late in the game.’

‘We are playing a game now, are we?’

‘A very serious one, as you well know, Lord High Commander.’

‘Ah, you use my title, that must mean you are getting ready to slide the blade into my ribs. Metaphorically speaking, of course.’

Drake just looked at him.

‘You were about to slowly and painfully belabour your point,’ Macharius said. He was smiling, bringing the full force of his charm to bear to take the sting out of his words.

‘My point is a very simple one. The men you blame for the corruption are just doing the things that have always been done. They did not set up the system. They grew up with it. They are merely doing what their fathers did before them and their grandfathers before that, and on and on, back perhaps to the time when the Emperor was first immured within his Throne.’

‘So I am to forgive them their incompetence and corruption because their fathers and grandfathers were incompetent and corrupt too?’

Drake sighed, a theatrical display of patience. ‘No, but you should accept that they are only doing what everyone else does and has always done. You are making enemies you don’t need. The people you call corrupt think you are changing the rules simply to suit yourself. They think you are stripping them of their livelihoods and prerogatives for your own self-aggrandisement. They see you reassigning their rights to your own people and think you are worse than they are. They think you are the corrupt one and that you are taking what is theirs.’

‘They are wrong.’

‘From your point of view that is correct. From theirs…’

‘You’re saying I should just accept their corruption?’ Macharius sounded a little annoyed now, which was rare for him.

‘You should accept the reality we live in. You are making enemies, Macharius, where you don’t need to. You sow dragon’s teeth where you could be making friends and allies. Provoke those people enough and they will destroy you. They have power.’

‘So do I.’

‘Yes. At the moment. At this moment you are most likely the most powerful man on the face of creation. You might not always be. Then you will need allies, all the allies you can get. A man who has risen so high has so much further to fall.’

‘That sounded almost like a threat,’ said Macharius.

‘A word of advice is all,’ said Drake.

The great lock of the military shuttle slid open with a hiss of equalising air pressure. Wisps of mist rose as the internal atmosphere mingled with that of Emperor’s Glory.

A large, stocky figure stood framed in the exit. He raised both his arms in greeting and strode down to meet Macharius. General Sejanus had arrived.

He was a broad, powerful man. His hair was starting to fall out and was combed over. His moustache was even more luxuriant than it had been when I first met him, as were his sideburns. His face was red. His nose was snub. He carried himself with a jaunty air, but you did not doubt for a moment that he could be ferocious when called upon to be so. I had the opportunity to fight alongside him on many occasions and I knew what a deadly combatant he could be.

He walked forward on his own, unaccompanied by any troops or bodyguards. They had all been told to wait within the craft until he had greeted Macharius.

‘General Macharius,’ he bellowed, and then he laughed. ‘And who is that tall, skinny bastard I see with you? Surely it can’t be the famous High Inquisitor Drake?’

He embraced Macharius, then the inquisitor, with a startling lack of formality in an officer so senior. He pushed Macharius back to arm’s length and held him there in a vice-like grip. Macharius smiled, seemingly as pleased to see Sejanus as Sejanus was to see him. They had been friends and allies for a very long time, since before either of them became famous.

Drake ignored this blast of bonhomie. ‘You look well,’ he said.

‘I can’t complain. This one…’ he tapped Macharius on the arm with a familiarity few others would have managed, ‘keeps me busy, running all over the sector, crushing insurgents here, smashing xenos there. What are you doing here? I cannot believe it is merely to greet me?’ The question was as sudden, slashing and direct as one of the campaigns for which he was so famous.

‘Apparently he has decided to lecture me on the futility of trying to weed out corruption,’ said Macharius. He made a slight warning hand signal with his left hand. Obviously this was not the place to be discussing anything secret. If Sejanus noticed it he gave no sign, but in his way he was just as

skilled at maintaining a front as Macharius.

‘The administrators count the loot, whine that the Imperium is not getting enough and carry tales back to the toads in the heart worlds, you mean,’ said Sejanus. ‘They line their own pockets while they do so as well, I expect.’

‘I see time and distance have not blunted your pretence of bluff honesty,’ said Drake. He did not sound offended. He sounded like an adult listening to the banter of children, faintly amused and a little weary. ‘I have often admired the perfection of the act.’

Sejanus reached out and slapped him on the back. The impact was as loud as the snap of gunfire. Drake winced.

‘It is good to have you back, Sejanus,’ said Macharius. Clearly he was not going to discuss anything important here and now. ‘I read your dispatches from the front with interest.’

‘Glad you enjoyed them,’ said Sejanus. ‘Dictated them to my secretary while I was storming a heretic citadel. I trust I made myself look good enough to justify some new decorations?’

‘You appeared profoundly heroic,’ said Macharius.

‘Good. My scribe is doing his job then. I should hope so too. I pay the man enough.’ He shot a look at Drake. ‘You still writing those reports of yours?’

‘I confess I am,’ said the inquisitor. ‘And I fully intend to write one about this section of our glorious crusade.’

‘Just remember to make me look like a hero then,’ said Sejanus.

‘I shall make you look exactly like you are,’ said Drake with some satisfaction.

‘I can see I am going to need to write my own memoirs, to make sure my true heroism is revealed then,’ said Sejanus. He obviously understood as well. He was a lot sharper than he chose to appear.

‘So the Imperium is getting restless about our conquests, and Drake is getting nervous,’ said Sejanus. He lounged at his ease in a great overstuffed leather armchair and stared around with considerable appreciation at the furnishings of Macharius’s apartments.

There was a lot to appreciate: intricate statues from Silate of Xen showing soldiers in uniforms that were out of fashion when the Emperor had walked among men, three-dimensional holo-paintings of battle scenes depicting

Macharius winning his victories on a hundred worlds. I recognised myself in a few of them, an ordinary enough looking face staring out in suspicion and fear, a uniformed man with a shotgun clutched in his hands. The strange thought occurred to me that folk would be looking upon these paintings and seeing me in a thousand years, just as I had looked upon men long dead depicted in paintings in the Museum of Chalcedony Angels on Husk.

'He thinks I am moving too fast. There is intrigue with the local nobles and governors. The Navy is being uncooperative. The Administratum is becoming suspicious.'

Sejanus lifted his glass of brandy and swirled it. 'So we can expect a swirl of intrigue and assassinations.'

'We've always had that. We can just expect it to intensify.' There was silence for a moment, then Macharius spoke. 'How did it go with the Adeptus Astartes?'

I kept my face bland. I could not keep the shock from my face at his next statement, though.

'House Belisarius came through. They are interested,' said Sejanus. 'Representatives will be arriving soon.'

'Good. It would be good if they arrived as spectacularly as possible. It will give the spies something interesting to report back to the High Lords.'

Macharius looked at me. 'You may want to close your mouth now, Lemuel. You look as if you are trying to catch flies in it.'

'You sure he said that?' Anton asked. He sounded as excited as a child who had been told he would get glowberry cake for his Name Day. 'You sure he said the Adeptus Astartes?'

'As certain as I am that I am talking to an idiot,' I said.

'You shouldn't speak about Ivan like that.'

We were on the roof. It was night. The cold stars glittered overhead. Macharius had summoned a new contingent of guards and dismissed me. I looked down. Below us I could see the great geodesic jungle dome Macharius had built for his private hunting parties. Ivan unzipped his fly and pissed down on it. 'Only rain those poor creatures will see on this world,' he said, as if that explained everything. The metal half of his face was unreadable as always, but when he turned his head I could see the human side was frowning.

‘What’s on your mind?’ I asked.

‘Macharius and Sejanus would not talk about this in front of the inquisitor but would in front of you,’ he said. ‘It doesn’t add up.’

‘You’ve developed a nasty, suspicious mind,’ I said.

‘It comes from having hung around with all these officers and nobles for the past ten years,’ said Ivan. ‘And from not being stupid.’

‘Anton has enough of that for all three of us,’ I said.

‘He must know you would tell us and maybe even your fancy woman,’ Ivan said. I considered the thing, turning it over in my mind. I had not needed to tell Anna. She had already known. So had a lot of other people it seemed. ‘Yes.’

‘And if you tell us, he must know that Anton will tell his highborn bint.’

‘She’s not a bint,’ Anton said. ‘She’s a lady.’

‘You think he wants word to get out?’ I said.

‘That he’s negotiating in secret with the Space Marines?’

‘Did he say which Chapter?’ Anton asked. He was still excited by the prospect of Space Marines.

‘Yes, Anton,’ I said. ‘He drew me pictures of their captains as well. In crayon.’

‘Can I see them?’

Anton was mocking me now, turning my assumption of his stupidity around on me. I walked over to the edge and took a leak myself. The stream of piss became invisible a long way before it hit the dome. It was a long way to fall. I thought about what Drake had said to Macharius.

‘You think it’s going to happen then?’ Ivan asked.

‘I think Sejanus was sent on a secret mission to contact the Adeptus Astartes. That’s what all of those private chats with Belisarius in the past were about. His House has connections with the Adeptus Astartes.’

‘It’ll be the Space Wolves, then,’ said Anton. ‘That’s who it will be.’

‘Most likely, Anton,’ I said.

‘Why? It’s not like Macharius. He avoids contact with the Space Marines if he can. They are the only men in the known galaxy who can steal his thunder.’

‘He doesn’t tell me these things,’ I said. ‘I am guessing it’s because he must feel he needs their help.’

‘Since when has Macharius ever needed anybody’s help?’

‘Since now I guess.’ It was a troubling thought. Macharius was not a man who sought aid from anyone. He was always utterly confident in his own ability to deal with any contingency. That he was reaching out to the Emperor’s Angels told us that something deeply worrying was going on.

‘Maybe he’s looking for allies against the Administratum,’ Ivan said. ‘Maybe he has his eyes on something bigger.’

‘That sounds dangerously like treason, Ivan.’

He answered obliquely. ‘You know the Space Marines will intervene when and where they like. They always do. Maybe he just wants to make sure they see him in the right light.’

‘What could Macharius offer Space Marines?’ Anton asked.

It was a good question. The Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes already had everything they needed. I thought about the Fist and Macharius’s anger at its loss. ‘I think he wanted to make them a gift of the artefact we picked up on Demetrius.’

‘It would explain why he was so worked up about it going missing. I’ve never seen him so annoyed about anything.’ Somehow Ivan’s metal features looked thoughtful. It was something about the eyes.

‘I thought generals like Macharius were not supposed to have anything to do with Space Marines. Separation of powers?’ Anton said.

I imagined what would happen when the lords of the Administratum found out about this, as they surely would if they had not already. I had not spent ten years watching Macharius manoeuvre without learning something about Imperial politics.

‘You ever feel like you have just got into a pool full of piranha-gators? You just don’t know how many or where they are?’ Ivan said. ‘I’m starting to feel that way.’

I knew what he meant.

‘Well,’ said Ivan. ‘It’s getting late, and we’ve got duty tomorrow. It’s the triumph, you know.’

‘As if we could forget.’

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The day of Macharius’s triumph dawned.

The crowds roared. Flower petals, paper aquilas and prayer scrolls rained down around us, turning the platform on top of the Baneblade into an altar for the people’s offerings to Macharius. They greeted him like a prophet as well as a conqueror, and I wondered how many were starting to believe the rumours we had been hearing ever since we had returned to Emperor’s Glory: that Macharius was a saint made invincible by the Emperor’s Light and Blessing, fated to reunite humanity under the rule of the Golden Throne.

If ever a man looked the part, it was Macharius that day. Tall and youthful-looking and golden, even though he was old enough to be the grandfather of most of those in the crowd. A wreath of gilded laurel was wound into his hair. His burnished chestplate glittered gold in the sunlight. He looked like he had just stepped out of one of those religious paintings in the cathedral.

Even I would not have been surprised at that moment to see a halo appear around his head. He basked in the adulation of the masses and it seemed to feed something in him. He glowed with enthusiasm and righteous joy. He raised his right hand and waved to the crowd with utter confidence. He smiled with ruthless charm. No sign of the anger and impatience that had been eating away at him since our return from Demetrius showed.

Around the Baneblade, cyber-cherubim fluttered, carrying the portable vision altars that would record this event for posterity and see it broadcast

across the world and beyond. Imprints would be dispatched to every army in the field. Remembering my conversation with Anna, I could not help but imagine the gnashing of teeth among the field commanders. There would be those among them who would look upon this triumph with envy and see it as a right that Macharius's mere presence had denied them. More and more of them were coming into the system for a great conclave. Some of them were in orbit above us, even now.

I kept my hand clutched tight on my shotgun and glanced around to make sure that Anton and Ivan and the others were equally alert.

I was in no fit state of mind for triumphal marches. I saw the use of the Baneblade for something other than the crushing of the Emperor's enemies as mildly sacrilegious. I looked out at the crowd and every face seemed that of a potential assassin. I scanned every balcony for snipers. Every time something glittered in a window above me, I made ready to throw myself forward and knock Macharius down and out of line of sight.

The Avenue of the Emperor was lined with statues of Imperial heroes and saints. It led all the way to the Cathedral of the Emperor's Glory. New stone and plascrete images of Macharius arose on every intersection. Some of them were merely relics of former idols, so old that people had forgotten who they were. They were being resculpted in the image of today's hero. Some of them were new and rose gigantically above us, largest of all, dwarfing the statues around them as the achievements of Macharius dwarfed those of his precursors.

The workmen's platforms were still in place. Normally they would have been filled with labourers plastering and painting and chipping away with chisels or working gold filigree into the statues, but today they were filled with cheering, red-faced people, waving scarves and banners, throwing offerings, chanting the name of Macharius. Perhaps it was the same workmen in their feast day finery, for a planetary holiday had been declared to celebrate the triumph.

The crowd's cries blended together until they filled the air with their vibration. I could feel it rumble in my chest in the same way as I could the vibration of the tank's drives beneath my feet. I must confess that gave me a certain nostalgia for older and simpler days, when Ivan and Anton and the Undertaker had merely been part of the crew of a Baneblade. It made me remember Oily and the lieutenant and Corporal Hesse and the New Boy and

Snake, and all the others who had died along the march to this triumph. The thought did not make my mood any less sour.

Something flashed on a platform above us. I looked up startled, but it was just a man raising a silver drinking flask to his lips and catching the reflected light of the sun. I told myself to relax, that no one wanted to kill Macharius, that these people loved him, for leading the crusade, for returning their world to the Emperor's Light, for restoring the stability and certainty of Imperial rule.

Anna's words wriggled into my mind again. I thought of all the nobles who had ruled this world and the surrounding systems before the Imperium came. How did they really feel about their privileges being usurped, their absolute authority being denied? There had been those who fought to the death against it. There had been others who surrendered reluctantly. There had been others who had been only too willing to embrace the new order that Macharius had brought. Who could tell what was going on behind the smiling masks of their faces?

All of the nobles on all of these worlds were schemers. It was what they did, who they were. Their families had remained in power for millennia because of that. They had been born into a world where they plotted before they were torn from their mother's breasts. They probably conspired against the other babies in the creche to get a bigger share of the milk. Some of them had aligned themselves with Macharius because they had seen which way the wind was blowing, where temporary advantage was to be seized. They might jump the other way if circumstances changed. Things were still fluid. How could they not be?

Macharius had brought more worlds into the Imperium than any man since the time of the Emperor. A new order was being born out here on the edge of the galaxy. Macharius had within his disposal entire systems and subsectors to grant as fiefs, the sort of rewards that made a few inconvenient deaths a negligible consideration for most nobles. I began to understand, to truly understand, what Anna had been getting at.

The seeds of an empire were all here. It would not have been the first time that an Imperial commander had set himself up as an absolute ruler, had splintered away from the Imperium. Such things had been one of the causes of the Great Schism, which Macharius had set himself to mend. From listening to him I understood that the reins of empire were the last thing

Macharius intended to seize, but if I was an Imperial bureaucrat lolling in my palace in the distant heart worlds would I believe that? Would I assume that Macharius would not do what I myself would?

And, what if Macharius were lying? He did not confide in me. He did not confide in Drake. He did not confide in anyone, really. He kept his own council. What if all of this was an act? That his charming visage hid a ruthless will and the talent of a master manipulator, I already knew. I had seen plenty of evidence for it. He might be merely biding his time until he had consolidated his rule and then…

I looked at the cheering crowd. I thought of the planetary audience, of those cherubim focusing the mechanical eyes of recorded history on this spot. I thought of the gigantic war machine rumbling across the stars at his command. I thought of the sheer power that Macharius had within his grip. What man would not be changed by such things? It would be inevitable that he came to take such things as his due, to believe himself worthy of adulation and of worship.

I told myself that it did not really matter to me. It was not my role in life to worry about such things. I was just a bodyguard to the Lord High Commander. It was my job to see that his enemies did not kill him, nothing more.

I scanned the crowd looking for threats. I saw nothing. I felt they were there, nonetheless. Macharius waved, eyes unreadable above the glittering smile.

The Baneblade approached the steps of the cathedral. Barriers kept back the press of the crowd, preventing them from being crushed to jelly beneath our tracks. A signal was given, the massive tank rumbled to a halt. Behind us, the line of garlanded vehicles pulled to a halt. Overhead the Valkyries and Vulture gunships soared by.

Under normal circumstances Macharius would simply have leapt down from the side of the vehicle. I had seen him do it before with the casual athleticism of the supremely fit man. Not today, though. A long ramp with a banister of moulded metal angels was wheeled into place. Macharius stepped forward, waved to the crowd and strode down. The rest of us were right behind him. A contingent of his bodyguard, who had been waiting at the foot of the steps, moved to meet him. They were accompanied by a

delegation that consisted of the archprelate of the cathedral and his entourage. The clerics smiled unctuously, only too pleased to be taking part in this ceremony and come to the notice of the great man.

Macharius moved to greet them like long-lost comrades. I scanned the faces in the crowds behind the barriers. They were not the same locals we had seen in the streets and on the balconies of hab-blocks. They were garbed with the elaborate formality of the nobility, wearing the richest sparkle-cloths, shimmering with wealth and good health. I reminded myself that these were still relatively minor functionaries. They had only managed to cajole and bribe a place on the steps. The truly influential would be within the cathedral, waiting to see Macharius invested with his honours and to listen to his speech of triumph.

I caught one man staring at me with hot-black eyes that seemed full of hatred. I gave him my most annoying grin, for it was obvious he envied me my place at Macharius's side. Doubtless he was thinking of the use to which he could put the influence granted by being so close to the general's presence. I almost smiled at the irony that a slum boy from Belial should be on the general's side of the barrier and a wealthy nobleman should be on the other. In another time or place our positions would not even have been reversed. I would have been one of those hanging from the statues outside. Then again, that's the thing about events like a crusade; they disrupt the ordered nature of the universe.

We moved up the steps to the arched entrance of the cathedral. The face of some local saint looked down on us from the stonework. I took another glance around. Part of me was glad to get Macharius out from under the sky. There were too many places for snipers to lurk. Part of me was worried. The entrance to the cathedral would be a good choke point for an ambush, and the press of bodies we would soon be moving through could easily hide a killer whose concealed weapon security checks had missed.

As if to confirm my suspicions, someone rushed out from the crowd. They had managed to force their way through the barrier or perhaps be lifted over. I moved to interpose myself between her and Macharius, shotgun held at waist height pointed directly at her. If I pulled the trigger, I would spray half the high notables of the planet behind her with her blood and entrails.

The girl was beautiful and beautifully dressed, long blonde hair, hanging almost to her waist, her face transformed by a look of ecstatic adoration, a

garland of flowers held outstretched in her hand like an offering.

'Stop,' I told her. She did not seem to notice the shotgun in my hands. Her eyes were focused on something behind me with a look of religious fervour. She took another step forward. 'Stop or I will shoot.'

I was shouting, but I was not sure she could hear me over the roar of the crowd and the rumble of engines. I did not take my eyes off her. She did not look particularly threatening but then she might have been chosen for that reason.

I felt a hand on my shoulder but I didn't look away. Macharius's voice said in my ear, 'Stand down, Lemuel. She is no threat.'

'She might be an assassin, sir,' I bellowed.

The girl might not have been able to hear me but Macharius's keen senses had no trouble. 'Stand down. That is an order. She is no danger to me.'

I considered disobeying him, but only for a moment. If the girl was an assassin and she killed Macharius, no one would be interested in the fact that Macharius had ordered me to let her by. I would be for the high jump and no mistake. On the other hand, it was Macharius giving the order and he was not a man you disobeyed. I let my shotgun point to the ground and stepped to one side. My eyes never left the girl.

She approached him like one overcome by a mixture of awe and desire. Her mouth was slightly open, she licked her lips with a small pink tongue and her eyes were fixed on Macharius. He bent his head forward as she placed the wreath over his neck. He bowed and swept past, and only then, when the focus of attention had passed, did the rest of the security detail sweep forward, scoop her up and take her away. I did not doubt that she would spend some memorable hours being interrogated. Judging from her expression she would probably think it was worth it.

We passed through the arch of the cathedral, flanked by robed priests of the Imperial cult. The sudden silence was shocking, as was the cool of the shadowy interior after the heat outside. The roar of the crowd became a subdued murmur, cut off by sonic-deadener fields and the thick walls of the towering structure itself. It took my eyes a few panicked moments to adjust. It would have been the perfect time for an assassin to strike, while the guards were blinded by the transition from light to dark. It's how I would have done it myself.

The archprelate had laid an arm on Macharius's sleeve and guided him

towards a curved flight of stairs leading up. I do not think he realised how close he came to being clubbed down by Anton and Ivan. They were both as nervous as me. Macharius smiled affably, as if he did not already know the way and was grateful to the archprelate for his guidance. Unlike the prelate, I knew that, since the hospice in Irongrad, Macharius had never entered a building without knowing the layout and how to get out. He never forgot any lesson the universe taught him.

I pushed on ahead, accompanied by the Undertaker. He moved grimly and silently, pushing slightly in front of Macharius on the stairs as they wound upwards, just far enough that no one could get a clear shot at the general around the curve. The stairs had already been scoured by internal security and by Drake's people. We were taking the stairs rather than the archprelate's private elevator because such devices could all too easily become death traps.

We came at last to the great balcony above the cathedral arch. The way was already open, and security men guarded the entrance. I looked at them closely, making sure I recognised their faces. We gave the handsign recognition codes and they responded correctly. I looked at the Undertaker and he nodded, and we stepped out through the curtain fields of silence.

A huge wave of sound passed over us, so loud it seemed almost deadening. The crowd roared, mistaking the Undertaker, in his uniform, for Macharius, which was the intention. An assassin might be tempted to take a shot at him. If it made the Undertaker nervous, he gave no sign.

We glanced around and saw only our own people on the balconies around the cathedral square. Ten thousand men of Macharius's personal guard were drawn up on the steps now and in the open space leading to it. On all the balconies were armed men in their uniforms. Ratling snipers had lashed themselves to gargoyles and surveyed the crowd through the telescopic sights of their long-barrelled rifles.

The Undertaker glanced at me to see if I had noticed anything he had not. I gave him the all-clear sign. He nodded and stepped back inside to the disappointment of the legions of adoring worshippers who had thought he was Macharius. I took up a position on one side of the entrance, beside a support pillar, partially obscured by one of the huge, draped flags. I could watch the crowd and Macharius's back from here.

Mechanicus cherubim fluttered around the balcony, perched overhead on

the gargoyles, engaged in heated exchanges with some of the ratlings. Macharius stepped out onto the balcony. The roar that had greeted the Undertaker and myself was as nothing to the one that came now. The crowd were certain it was him this time and their shouts of adulation could have deafened a daemon on the noisiest floor of the most chaotic hell.

Someone made adjustments on a tech-altar. The noise-deadening fields kicked in. The roar became the background rumble of the sea heard from a beach. Macharius could now talk with his companions if he so wished. All of his attention was focused outwards, though.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWELVE

Macharius stepped forward to the edge of the balcony and saluted the men of his own guard. They saluted back and, as if that were a signal, the real procession started.

Down the Avenue marched Titans, building-tall, humanoid in shape, the mightiest ground-based war machines ever built. Their void shields made the air around them shimmer. Flags fluttered on their shoulders. On the left were the banners of their legion. On the right, in honour of Macharius, was his personal banner, the lion's head. It was a tribute the Titan Legions rarely granted to mere mortal soldiers. The earth shook as the great war engines approached, and even the mighty roar of the crowd fell silent as they contemplated this evidence of the might of the Imperium. The heads of the Titans as they passed were at the same level as the balcony on which we stood. Their fierce gazes were turned to Macharius and they raised their weapons in salute.

At the exact moment they reached the front of the cathedral there was a sound of thunder from the sky above and thousands of twin-tailed Valkyrie gunships streaked into view, trailing streamers of green and gold smoke, painting the sky with Macharius's colours, leaving the world in no doubt that even the clouds were owned by his forces. They kept moving overhead as the long lines of troops moved down the Avenue.

It was only then that I began to appreciate the true scale of the triumph and exactly how much organisation had gone into making it a reality. I suppose

it was understandable. The event was only superficially a celebration of the Imperium's greatest general. The reality was that it was a demonstration of Imperial might and purpose to all of those nobles who had been gathered from across the newly reconquered sector. No one was going to be left in any doubt that the Emperor's rule had returned. All of them would be aware that they were merely looking upon a trivial fraction of the army that moved out there among the stars. Of course, to anyone watching it did not seem trivial.

After the Titans marched the men of the Snow Raiders, Leman Russ tanks to the fore, followed by Chimera armoured personnel carriers and then a thousand selected men marching. They wore their tall white bearskin hats even in the warm weather, and the officers had donned white bearskin cloaks. As they passed the front of the cathedral, they turned with disciplined precision and saluted as one. Every unit was to parade with just that sharpness today.

'They picked their best drill squads, I see,' murmured Anton from the place he had taken alongside me. He had his sniper rifle in his hand and held it ready. The Undertaker gave him a hard glance but Anton just continued to stand there. He looked nonchalant, as though he were considering lighting up a lho-stick. I would not have put it past him.

Next came the Calistan High Guard. They had mounted cavalrymen and hairless mammoths among their troops. The giant creatures had heavy weapons platforms strapped to their backs. They were notoriously temperamental beasts. One had run amok at the space port killing a hundred loaders only a few days back. I hoped the same thing was not repeated now. They passed without incident.

The Swordbearers of Stula followed. Tall men, garbed in kilts; their officers wore massive battle-blades strapped to their backs, bare-chested save for the leather straps of their scabbard harnesses. The men had bayonets affixed to their lasguns and twirled them in intricate patterns as they marched. Their officers all had shaved heads and long braided beards, and half of their faces were covered in tattoos of rank.

'That's just showing off,' said Anton. Even I was staring at him now. It was only a matter of time before one of the high muckety-mucks noticed him and took him to one side, for one of those conversations that you did not come back from.

The Boilermakers were next. No marching for them. They were a mechanised regiment. All of them were in tanks or APCs, with the cog-wheel flag of their regiment flying above them. When you looked closely you could see that they were as kitted out with mechanical limbs and organs as Ivan, only in their case their best soldiers had volunteered to have their flesh replaced. They followed some obscure sect of the Machine-God back on their home world, or so I'd heard. 'No marching for those bastards,' said Ivan. He was a little quieter now, so perhaps the Undertaker's glares were having some effect.

It was almost a relief when the 444th Infantry marched past. Their uniforms were Cadian-style tunics in light grey. Their boots gleamed with black polish. Their helmets were spiked.

Next came the Seventh Belial, our old regiment from what seemed like a lifetime ago. They had Baneblades and Leman Russ and Chimeras. Some of them marched just to show they could. I felt almost nostalgic when I saw their grey tunics and rebreather masks. I wondered if we would ever see Belial again. Much to my surprise, Anton said nothing. He just stood there watching misty eyed as the representatives of more and more regiments trooped by.

On and on they came; unit after unit, company after company, all of them looking as smart as if they had just got their first uniforms, and marching with a precision that would have done their drill instructors proud.

Cadian Shock Troopers, in rebreather masks and tri-dome helmets, marched in advance of Darkstorm Fusiliers all in shadowcloaks. Tallarn Desert Raiders, heads swathed in scarves, bodies straight as ramrods, strode along behind bare-armed, tattooed Catachan Jungle Fighters.

After the first few score, other things started to be mingled in with the marching troops. Massive converted vehicle crawlers carried dioramas and symbols of the crusade's triumphs. In an enormous cage was a roaring bipedal gigantosaur from Paleon. It had been kept by the former governor and fed with his enemies in the arena. Macharius had ordered the governor and all his kin sent into the same arena armed with the sharpened sticks they had equipped their former captives with. It had been an edifying and horrific spectacle, but the watching nobles had got the point.

There was the Oracle-Machine, which had been worshipped as a god on Ibal. Men had thought it a remnant of the Dark Age of Technology and

followed its pronouncements as if they had come from the Throne of the Emperor itself. Macharius had revealed it was nothing more than a hollowed out shell in which corrupt priests had hidden, making their announcements over a heavily modified vox system.

There were two gigantic xenos who looked like walking trees. They were the last remnants of the Viridar, a sentient jungle for which they had provided nodes of intelligence and communication. They had lost much of their greenish colouration, and I wondered how long they could survive so far from their home world. Their leaves looked brown and their bark-skins were starting to show a sickly white mould that did not look in the slightest bit natural. I had heard that their sap was hallucinogenic and that some of their captors had started tapping it and selling it on the black market.

There were prisoners in chains, of course, tens of thousands of them. They still wore the finery of nobles, but it had not been cleaned in weeks or perhaps months. They had not been allowed to bathe or shave. They looked gaunt and hollow-eyed and mad and desperate. They would be executed after the procession. These were nobles who had opposed Macharius and lost. I am sure the lesson there was not lost on the spectators.

On and on it rumbled, minute after minute, hour after hour. I half expected Macharius to be bored by it, but the smile never shifted from his face and he continued to look on with a mixture of pride and exultation. I suppose being worshipped as a god never grows tiring.

After long hours, the great procession finally ended. It was not because the crusade had run out of prisoners or victories to celebrate or soldiers to honour. There was simply too many of all three. It was because it was time for Macharius to move on to other things.

We stepped down from the balcony and entered the cathedral proper. The assembled planetary nobility greeted Macharius with applause. Some of them rose from the pews and reached out to try and touch the hem of his garments. Some of them he greeted affably, most of them we pushed none too gently back into place. Normally we would have been cuffed for it, common soldiers manhandling nobles, but not on this day and not in this place. We were Macharius’s bodyguard and all the normal rules of protocol were suspended in the great man’s presence.

Macharius took his place in the elevated area in front of the altar and accepted the blessing of the archprelate under the gaze of the statues of

saints. Some claim to have seen a halo around him then. All I saw were the altar lights playing around him, but I suppose if you looked at them from certain angles you might have seen a holy glow.

Then it was time to leave. We swept out through the rear entrance of the cathedral. There were aircars waiting at all four doors to confuse any potential assassins. Macharius only decided at the last second which one to take. The landing ramp was clear. Valkyries hovered overhead. We clambered into the aircar and rose into the sky, flights of gunships moving into position around us as an escort.

We returned to the palace. Looking out the porthole on the side of the aircar I saw a procession of glittering flyers following us. All of the great nobles and their retinues had been invited to the banquet that followed the triumph. I looked at Anton. He pretended to stifle a yawn. I knew what he meant. It was going to be a long night.

The orchestra played. Music filled the ballroom. The nobles danced. All of them were surrounded by their retinues, bodyguards, personal attendants of every sort, courtesans and companions and pet assassins.

Officers wore full dress uniforms, noblemen their court finery, noblewomen long gowns, narrow at the waist, their great hooped skirts supported by suspensor systems so that they seemed to float just above the ground. Every dress was a statement of power. They each cost as much as supplying a regiment. They glowed with precious materials and fitted their wearers with the same precision as a personal battle-suit. They would be worn only once and discarded, just to show that their owners could afford such things.

Servants moved through the throng bearing trays of drinks and elaborate snacks. Enormous chandeliers housing poison snoopers and surveillance systems looked down like the jewelled eyes of enormous insects.

I wondered how many thousands of people were here. I wondered how much all of this was costing and how many of the poor in the hives of other worlds that money could support. I did so very briefly, for one of the things about being surrounded by enormous wealth is how quickly you come to take it for granted.

Macharius sat on a floating throne. Beside him, on either side, were two of the loveliest women I had ever seen, both high ladies of one of the noble

Houses. Both looked at him as if he were some delicacy they intended to sneak from the plate of the other. They both appeared to admire Macharius without noticing the woman on the other side of him. The Lord High Commander was courtly to both and obviously amused by their rivalry. They both sought to get something from him while he played them and their Houses off against each other.

I stood behind Macharius on a raised dais and looked out at the crowd. They were moving through one of the great formal ceremonies so beloved by our aristocrats, one of those rituals so elaborate and courtly that only people with an enormous amount of free time on their hands could master all the intricacies.

As ever Macharius looked completely relaxed and at his ease, but I suspect he was bored. These vast ceremonies were more for the benefit of the locals than they were for him. He would rather have been directing a battle somewhere. Still, in the absence of more physical conflict, he seemed to take some pleasure from social warfare, and here it was visible all around.

One of the ladies leaned forward and whispered something in Macharius's ear. Her mouth was so close Macharius must have felt her breath on his neck. Her rival reached out and touched his arm, letting her fingers rest there moments longer than were strictly necessary to get the general's attention. He turned to look at her, and she looked up at him with wide trusting eyes. Her lips were red and full, and parted invitingly.

Before she could say anything, a great gong sounded, and all were summoned to the feast.

The banqueting hall held thousands of people at hundreds of tables, but there was really only one that mattered and that was the one at which Macharius sat. The whole pecking order of the conquered sector was set out there. The most important governors and planetary nobles were at the table. The closer they were to Macharius, the more important they were. The nearest tables had the nobles of only slightly less importance, and those with relatively small influence in the great scale of things were relegated to the furthest corners of the room.

I stood behind Macharius's chair in my most smartly formal uniform. I was not there to eat. I was there to look impressive and protect Macharius. The fact that I was allowed to stand at his back with a shotgun in my hands

must have impressed a few of the notables because I could see them giving me considering looks. Little did they know, I thought, that Anton and Ivan and I took turns doing this.

Actually, they probably did, as I realised when I came to consider the matter. The planetary aristocracies had their own intelligence systems. They might even have known why we were there, but I doubted that they knew the whole truth of it: that ever since Karsk Macharius had considered us a form of personal, living lucky charm. He had kept at least one of us close to him at all times.

I was not the only one being noticed. I could see the local nobility studying Drake under their eyelashes as well. The less well informed were probably wondering how they could get close to him and find out what influence he had. There were, no doubt, rumours as to his identity circulating behind the lady's fans and out of the corners of men's mouths in every part of the room.

I glanced at the faces of the people closest to Macharius at the table, the ones close enough to speak with him. There was Drake. There was Blight. There was Raymond Belisarius, the factor for the great Navigator House. I wondered where his cousin was right now.

There were hundreds of nobles from the various worlds Macharius had conquered, the most important people politically in the sector. All of them were the heads of various factions, most of them were opposed to each other, and they spent their time glaring daggers at those they thought of as their rivals.

It was like observing a gathering of predators at a savannah waterhole, except that here there were no herbivores, only flesh eaters, all of them looking to tear a chunk off each other. Of all the people present I could not see the expression on Macharius's face. I was standing behind his seat so I could only guess it from the tone of the remarks I heard him addressing to the assembled throng. He spoke of the return of Imperial rule, of the reconstruction of the old order, of a new age of faith and unity to come. The crowd cheered and applauded while all the time thinking about what it could gain.

I thought once again about what Anna had told me. There were very few in the Imperium beyond the reach of its rulers. Possibly only the Space Marines of the Adeptus Astartes, who were a law unto themselves. The

great bureaucratic wheels of the Imperium were beginning to turn. The attention of that gigantic entity was being focused on this corner of the universe. How many of those people out there would still applaud Macharius if they knew that it might soon turn against him? How many potential assassins would there be then?

I thought about the generals of the crusade who would soon be arriving. How many of those would be truly loyal to Macharius?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

We moved through the palace in the wake of Macharius. Overhead, great murals depicting scenes from Imperial history looked down on him. In the massive atrium, a portrait of one-eyed Saint Teresius being nailed to the burning World Tree of Ydrasil by orks brooded overhead. As we passed into the reception chamber, we saw a titanic depiction of the Emperor within his Golden Throne surrounded by a halo of light while primarch angels watched over him. The paintings had been done by the greatest artist on the world Tyranticus, a genius with a liking for wine and theology. He was up there hanging from the roof like a spider in a wire harness even now, brushing away at some tiny corner of the painting, bringing some minuscule cherubim into being with his pigments and brush.

We had other things to think of. The warlords of the crusade were gathered in the conference chamber. They had come to report to their master and be rewarded for their excellence.

The high valves of the great bronze double door were open. We strode through. Multicoloured light from the stained glass windows threw beams down the vast chamber. Angels of glass in armour reminiscent of Space Marines trampled the necks of orks and heretics. After we passed through, the doors closed silently behind us.

The masters of the crusade sat at a huge circular table, as large as a Baneblade and carved from the vitrified remains of a section of the World Tree. An aquila was graven in its surface. Chairs were set out along the

wings, only the one at the aquila's head vacant. As Macharius entered, the occupants of the chairs rose at once and saluted smartly. All of them except Inquisitor Drake, who was not part of the military command structure. Macharius returned the greeting and took his seat.

'At ease, gentlemen. Be seated,' he said. 'It is good to see you all again.'

His voice was clipped and commanding, and his face was set as stone.

I took up my position behind Macharius and gave my attention to the newcomers. They were an impressive and terrifying bunch of men.

Immediately to Macharius's right was Sejanus. He lounged back on the great leather-upholstered command chair and looked as if he were going to put his boots on the table. A few times I saw him raise one leg, remember where he was and then put his foot decisively back on the floor. Sejanus, who had obviously been drinking late last night, had bags beneath his eyes and looked at the room with an odd mixture of good humour and pained menace, as if he wanted to order everyone to be quiet but could not because they were all of equal or higher rank.

To the right of Sejanus was General Tarka, resplendent in his hussar general's uniform. You could have cut yourself on the creases of his trousers. His boots were spotless. The brasswork on his sash and buckles was polished mirror-bright. His narrow face was lean and severe. His moustache perfectly framed his mouth as if it did not dare grow one millimetre beyond its assigned place. He wore white gloves, which he inspected through his glittering diamond glass amplification monocle as though checking them for spots of dirt. He looked like the very caricature of the military martinet, one of those dress-up parade ground soldiers who knew nothing about the blood and mud of fighting.

I knew for a fact that he was not. He had fought hand to hand with orks and cut his way out of a heretical ambush with only his pistol and a shard of screen-glass salvaged from the wreckage of his ground car. In a regiment famous for its tradition of duelling, he was the most famous duellist. It was said he had killed over a hundred men in affairs of honour and was not above accepting a challenge now if one was offered to him. His wife was a famous beauty and famous, too, for her affairs, so he still got the opportunity now and again. There were those who said he encouraged her just so he could duel. I doubted it. There is no end to the malice of gossip.

Beyond him sat General Fabius. Fabius looked half asleep, a state

accentuated by his drooping eyelids, which ensured that even at his most alert he never looked particularly awake. He had a reputation for liking the good life and for taking the choicest selection of loot, but he was a general of fantastic skill, a specialist in siege warfare, who had taken more cities and hives than anyone alive. He had lost an arm in battle with an ork warlord, and its mechanical replacement was said to be strong enough to crush metal and bone in its grip.

To Fabius's right was Arrian. He seemed a scruffy-looking man until you looked closely at him and realised that his dress uniform was not creased or lined. It was something about the man himself that gave the impression. Perhaps it was the unkempt hair or the way he leaned an elbow on the table and propped his head on his fist. He drummed the fingers of his other hand on the tabletop and twisted his head around on his long neck to focus first on one person then another. Many people thought him mad. Many thought him touched by a holy light. Nobody was sure what he thought. Everyone remembered he had ordered the massacre of a million heretic children on Gamara 12.

Lysander seemed inclined to tell Arrian to stop looking at him. He was a tall man, handsome, more so even than Macharius; but where Macharius was golden-haired and golden-skinned, Lysander was black-haired and pale. He had the narrowest of moustaches, which he was always stroking. He appeared to be admiring his own reflection in the mirrored tabletop, but he looked quite capable of wrestling an ork should one choose to enter the room and do battle right now.

Next to him was Cyrus, the tallest man in the room by far. His features were craggy and stern, and his silver hair fitted his head like a Guardsman's helmet. His eyes were a chilling blue. He gave the impression of great age and great wisdom, although with the juvenat treatments many of the others were almost certainly as old as he was. He was writing something on a pad of papyrus, probably making a note of the fact that Macharius was twenty-two seconds late for the meeting.

By that time I had looked all the way around the table. On Macharius's left sat General Crassus, a man of medium height, who was almost as broad as he was tall. His face was pockmarked and a scar ran from over his right eye to the middle of his cheek. It caused the corner of his mouth to pucker up constantly. It seemed unlikely that a man in his position could not have had

the scar removed by medical adepts, so he must have kept it for a reason, to remind himself of something. Crassus had a reputation for annexing more than his fair share of the spoils of war. He kept winning his battles, though, so no one had thought to lodge a charge.

All of the assembled generals looked at Macharius and at each other, assessing potential rivals and their relative strengths. It was as if this table were a battlefield and their opponents were each other. The prize was favoured commands in the next part of the crusade.

Macharius played his underlings off against each other. In some ways, their rivalry was a good thing. It kept them sharp and competitive. In another way it sowed the seeds of the ensuing disaster, for many of the men in that room hated, feared and detested each other. Even though they were nominally in the same army, they regarded each other as the foes and rivals they had on occasion been, back before Macharius had ended the Great Schism. At that moment, though, there was no sign of disunity.

‘Gentlemen, let us have your reports as to the progress of Operation Centurion,’ said Macharius. He looked at Sejanus.

Sejanus smiled, and his booming voice filled the room. ‘Total victory for Battlegroup Sejanus. We have smashed the krull in their home worlds, driven their axe lords deep into the mountain fastnesses. A few guerrillas hold out in the volcanic sectors of Indoland, but they are being hunted down. All of the productive cities are under Imperial control, and output is running at eighty per cent of pre-reclamation norms. I expect it to be at one hundred and five per cent by the time we are done. Without the axe lords tithing productivity for their own personal projects, we can direct the output of the Deep Mines into arms and equipment production far more efficiently.’

He smiled, looked around at all of the other generals and sat down again.

‘General Fabius, pray report,’ said Macharius. Fabius rose slowly with a slight grunt and looked at Macharius somnolently. ‘Battlegroup Fabius reports complete success. The main agri-worlds of the Elaric Combine are occupied by our troops. The remainder have agreed to terms now that they have seen the futility of resistance. The local nobles would rather keep their perks under Imperial rule than see their estates go to their rivals under redistribution law if they are declared outlaws and traitors by the Imperium.’

His eyes were focused on Macharius all the time. He looked like an amiable bear slowly rousing itself from hibernation.

For myself, I was wondering whether anyone here was going to report less than perfect success. To do so would be to cede an advantage to their rivals.

That said, Macharius was known for his ability to get to the truth behind his commanders' reports, and the penalties for false information would be far worse than letting a rival steal a march. General Xander had been demoted and reassigned to supervising a prison world for doing so. No, I thought, in essence these reports would be perfectly truthful, albeit burnished to make their presenters shine.

'General Arrian?'

General Arrian writhed to his feet and surveyed the assembled generals with glittering eyes, as if he thought they might be disguised heretics plotting against him. 'I report utter, crushing Imperial victory over the worms of the Hectacore. The heretics burn. Their ungodly spawn are in re-education camps,' his tone let everyone know what he thought of this particular piece of false mercy, 'their wells and reactor cores are assigned to righteous purpose. Battlegroup Arrian is ready to bring the Emperor's will to more heretics.'

He sat down as abruptly as he had stood. His gaze turned upwards to look at the armoured angels overhead, rather than contemplate the sinners surrounding him. General Fabius suppressed a smile. General Cyrus looked at him with his stony gaze. Macharius did not seem in the slightest bit perturbed.

General Lysander was already rising to his feet. He clicked his heels, saluted, stroked his moustache, contemplated his reflection on the table's surface for a moment and said, with a trace of mocking humour, 'It pains me to report less than total, crushing victory. Battlegroup Lysander can only report complete success. It was enough to merely encircle the assembled forces of the Hegemony of Iskander, cut their lines of supply and then defeat their ground armies in detail. Sadly, there proved no need to imprison the defeated in death camps or burn their children as heretics.'

His mocking gaze met that of Arrian. I half expected them to go for each other's throats. Here were two men who really hated each other. Lysander was one of those Imperial officers who thought honour was important and that there was a proper way to win a war. Personally, I would rather have

followed Arrian: at least he had no illusions and did what was necessary to achieve victory whatever the cause.

‘Gentlemen, gentlemen,’ was all Macharius said. The reproof was delivered in a mildly paternal tone, but I knew him well enough to sense the steely anger beneath. He was not about to tolerate friction between his high commanders. It was a measure of how feared and respected he was that Lysander immediately turned and made a small heel-clicking bow to him and Arrian returned to his study of angels at once.

General Cyrus rose slowly, ponderously. It was like watching a volcano heave itself up from the ocean floor; there was a suggestion of something vast, slow and irresistible in the movement. He paused to let a disapproving glance pass over Lysander, Arrian and Macharius, as if he considered the Lord High Commander not strict enough with his errant followers, sighed and began to lecture us. ‘At 12.09.4078.12.00 local time, the forces of the rebellious provinces of Sindar surrendered to the commander of Battlegroup Cyrus. This ended the unfortunate period of rebellion and satisfactorily returned all one hundred billion souls in the subsector to the Emperor’s Light.’

I rather liked the phrase “unfortunate period of rebellion”. It made it sound as if those worlds had been beyond Imperial rule for only a few months or years and not several millennia. I suppose in the general’s mind there was very little difference. And perhaps he had a truer grasp of the way the rulers of the Imperium view time than many of the others in the room.

General Crassus was on his feet before Cyrus had received Macharius’s acknowledgement and sat down. ‘Battlegroup Crassus reports mission accomplished, sir. All tactical and strategic objectives as covered in the overall campaign plan have been achieved.’

He was back in his chair almost at the same time as General Cyrus was. Macharius looked at the great holo-map on the table.

‘You are to be congratulated, gentlemen. You have all done your usual superlative jobs. I expected nothing less, and you have not disappointed me.’

He paused to let that sink in, and you could see all of them puff up with praise while at the same time looking a little disappointed that they personally had not been singled out for more. Macharius smiled.

‘Don’t worry, gentlemen, there are plenty more worlds for you to conquer.

Indeed, there are a virtually limitless number. He indicated the holo-map. It seemed to contract as the point of view pulled back. The huge area already conquered by the crusade shrank to a tiny pattern of light. ‘A whole galaxy is out there,’ Macharius said. ‘There are places not even the Emperor reached.’

Again he paused, just for a moment, to let his audience see what was coming, the way a skilled matador will let the bull see the blade before he kills it. It heightened the moment of drama. I was following the line of his thoughts myself. There were worlds out there that had never seen the Emperor’s Light. Macharius intended to bring it to them.

‘There are more worlds than one man could conquer in a lifetime, in a hundred lifetimes. There are worlds enough for all of you and then some.’

There was something else in his voice now, a promise. Worlds enough for all of you. I am sure I was not the only man there who read something into that. Did Macharius intend to carve out an empire here at the edge of the galaxy? Were these men to be his satraps? I looked at Drake. He had steepled his fingers on his stomach and his eyes were half closed. He had exactly the same look a great predator has before it springs.

I noticed I was not the only man looking at the inquisitor. The generals, too, were trying to judge his response. I wondered if this was some kind of test Macharius had set up, to see who would stand with him even in the presence of a representative of the distant Imperium.

And perhaps this was as much for Drake’s benefit as the generals’. Macharius had a gift for setting men up as if they were pieces on a regicide board, of arranging scenes in a drama that he controlled the outcome of. I found I was holding my breath as I waited to see what would happen next.

Macharius gestured to the huge swirl of stars on the holo-map. A large patch of it became illuminated. ‘This, gentlemen, is where we will be going next. This is what we will reclaim for the Emperor. There are thousands of systems, trillions upon trillions of souls, entire civilisations of xenos to be crushed or driven off.’

I saw General Crassus licking his lips. I wondered if he were thinking what I was: that the plunder of such a campaign would be immense, on a scale that had not been seen since the time of the Emperor. Or perhaps he was contemplating saving all those souls.

General Cyrus said, ‘It is a huge area, Lord High Commander, enormous.

Perhaps too great even for the armies of the crusade.’

‘My scouts have been out there among its people. There are human worlds who crave the blessing of the Emperor’s Law. They will side with us. There are thousands of worlds which can be recruiting grounds for new armies, factory worlds to equip those armies, agri-worlds to feed them. There are empty worlds that can be colonised with veteran troops. There will be gigantic new estates created. There will be need of men to rule these new realms.’

And there it was. The promise of empire, of estates that were greater than anything currently extant in the human realms, of new fiefs for those bold enough to take them, lands for veterans. I found myself, insanely, turning over possibilities in my own mind.

A man who had the ear of Macharius might be well rewarded. I did not need a world. I would settle for a hive. I suppressed a laugh at this sudden outbreak of megalomania and ambition, but looking at those generals I could see the temptation being waved in front of them. If I could think such thoughts, how much more potent must they be in the minds of those men who had only to stretch out a hand and grab them.

I realised it was not just the generals who were tempted. Drake was staring hard at Macharius. He heard the promise there too. Trillions of souls to be reclaimed for the Emperor, a gigantic expansion of the Imperium. He could be part of it as well. I thought I saw the glitter of ambition in his eyes, quickly suppressed.

‘It might be possible,’ said Tarka. ‘Might. But it would be fatal if our reach exceeded our grasp.’

Was he talking in code now? Did his words have a double meaning. He was looking at the inquisitor. Macharius’s words could easily be interpreted in a treasonous fashion if Drake chose to do so. Perhaps it was a test of where the inquisitor’s loyalties truly lay after all these years.

Lysander said, ‘If we strike quickly and hard it is possible. We could overrun these sectors before they knew what hit them. Amass a big enough hammer and you can crack any nut with one swing.’

‘The scale of your ambition is breathtaking,’ said Drake, and at his words the generals’ faces froze. They waited to hear what he had to say. ‘I have seen no additional requisitions for men and materiel put through to the Munitorum, though.’

‘The campaign can be funded by the worlds we have already conquered,’ said Macharius. ‘And supplied by the worlds we have added to the Imperium, and will add. The crusade will be self-sustaining and self-funding.’

‘And your authority for this?’ Drake asked.

‘I was tasked with returning worlds into the Emperor’s Light. I will do so, and I will not slack.’

‘Very good,’ said Drake. ‘I shall see that the scale of your ambitions are reported to the appropriate authorities.’

‘By all means do so. Be sure to add that my ambitions are in the service of the Imperium and not of myself.’

‘I will certainly report your words accurately,’ said Drake. ‘But in my enthusiasm I have interrupted your council. Pray, gentlemen, return to your planning.’

Macharius stood and walked over to where the inquisitor sat. He stood looming over him. There was a smile on his face, but his shadow fell upon the other man. I can still remember the sense of ominous forces gathering about the two of them even now. There was a tension in the air. The two of them seemed to have come to a fork in the road they had walked along for so long.

At that moment, the door burst open and something huge erupted into the room.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The guards on the door could not have stopped them even if they had wanted to, and they did not want to. They were on their knees in positions of deference, overcome at once with wonder and awe.

The newcomers were big men in ceramite armour. Let me rephrase that. They were huge men in ceramite armour, and they seemed even bigger. They moved with deadly, feral grace, and they confronted the highest warlords of the Imperium as if they had every right to simply burst into their council chambers.

All of the assembled generals gawped at them. Even Inquisitor Drake for once looked surprised, and I could not fault him for it. It is not every day the Emperor’s Angels step out of legend and into your life. Only Macharius kept his poise and made a gracious gesture of welcome.

The strangers growled and advanced upon him. I considered my action for a second. It was probably going to be suicidal to draw a shotgun on a Space Wolf, but if they had come for Macharius I did not see what else I could do. I was his bodyguard after all. I moved to put myself between the Lord High Commander and the Space Marine, convinced it was most likely going to be the last thing I did.

I found myself looking up into the face of an armoured giant. He showed long fangs that were in no way reassuring and grinned as though I were not pointing a shotgun directly at his head. I swallowed but I held my ground. Eyes that caught the light like those of a dog studied me for a moment. The

pupils contracted. He sniffed the air, wrinkled his nose as if he caught wind of something he didn't like.

'Did I fart?' I said. It sounds ludicrous but at that exact moment I could not think of anything else to say. The giant's booming laughter washed over me.

'By the Allfather, you don't lack courage, son of man,' he said. 'Now point your shooting stick somewhere else before I take it off you and ram it up your arse.'

Macharius's hand fell on my shoulder. 'Do as he says, Lemuel.'

I took a step back then, and so I was in the perfect place to observe the meeting between the Lord High Commander Solar Macharius and the legendary Ulrik Grimfang, Great Wolf of the Space Wolves Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes.

It was difficult to decide who looked more regal. There was never a man more commanding than Macharius, but Grimfang was something more than a man. He had been altered by processes developed when the Emperor walked among humankind and still carried within his body the gene-seed of the first primordial Space Marines. He looked more wolf than human, his face long and narrow, one hand replaced by a huge metal claw that reminded me in some ways of the one Macharius had lost.

He narrowed his eyes as he looked at Macharius, and the air fairly crackled between them. I don't know how Macharius managed to hold that superhuman gaze without looking away. I could not have done so. The Wolf walked around him, sniffing the air, all the time, inspecting the Lord High Commander from every angle.

Macharius did not flinch. You can still see the scene depicted on the walls of Macharius's palace on Emperor's Glory by Antiarchus. The choirs of watching angels are a somewhat unhistorical touch, but the rest is more or less accurate. My face was probably a lot paler and more frightened than the artist makes it look. I was fighting to stop myself shaking. Confronting a Space Wolf like that was like coming unexpectedly face to face with a large and hungry sabretooth. Now that the moment had passed, reaction was setting in.

The other generals continued to gape. I can't say as I blame them. Inquisitor Drake was first to recover his poise. He rose to his feet and said, 'Great Wolf, we welcome you to–'

‘Sit down and shut up,’ Grimfang bellowed. ‘I did not come all these light years to listen to your gabble!’

Drake sat down as if poleaxed. I would have done so myself if I had been near a chair, and I was only caught in the backwash of that fierce command. The Space Wolf stabbed out a finger at Macharius. ‘It is this one I have come to see… and to smell.’

I thought for a moment that he was going to bite out Macharius’s throat with those great fangs, but then I noticed he had merely placed his head close to Macharius’s and was sniffing the air as though catching a scent. After a long, tense moment, he released the Lord High Commander.

‘Are you done?’ Macharius asked. His voice was cold and just as commanding as Grimfang’s.

The two of them eyed each other again, like two wolves about to fight for control of a pack. Macharius obviously did not appreciate having his personal space invaded. They glared at each other for long moments that seemed to pass as glacially as the Ice Winters of Taran.

The Great Wolf began to laugh, checked himself and said, ‘So you are the one who has started this new crusade. I heard what you had to say about conquering new worlds for the Imperium. You do not lack ambition, little man.’

Only a Space Wolf would have thought to describe Macharius as a little man. I was busy trying to understand Grimfang’s words. He had heard what Macharius had to say? Even if he had been waiting outside, which given his impetuous manner was unlikely, the door was sufficiently thick to make words inaudible to mortal ears. And Grimfang had most likely been striding through the corridors of the palace. Had he really been able to make out the words? Presumably so.

‘You object, do you?’ Macharius said. His voice held a measure of insolence that I feel certain Grimfang was not used to. He eyed the Lord High Commander as if considering smiting him with his chainsword.

‘You will bring war and havoc to thousands of worlds,’ said the Space Wolf. ‘You will make it rain blood and snow skulls. Billions will die.’

‘Do you object?’

‘No, little man. How could I object? It is good. There will be glory and conquest and the reaping of souls for the Allfather. We have come because we smell battle, strife such as has not been seen in millennia. This is our

place and these are our times. We have come to aid the Allfather's crusade and to take our share of the plunder of worlds.'

He reached out and grasped Macharius's arm in a gesture of comradeship.

I saw the look of shock on Drake's face and the look of triumph on Macharius's. The Space Wolves had given his actions the seal of approval of the Adeptus Astartes, one Chapter at least.

'Now, bring us drink!' Grimfang bellowed. 'And meat. We must celebrate this glorious day.'

With a sweep of his mighty arm, he cleared the table. Sejanus shrugged and produced a hip-flask. Servants were dispatched. Raw and bloody grox was brought.

The celebration began.

'Drink, little man,' said Grimfang. He offered me a goblet with his own hands. I was later to learn this was a great honour. Apparently he had been impressed by the way I had got between him and Macharius.

I looked at him. I looked at Macharius, and then I looked back at the goblet. The Space Wolves were gulping down some foul-smelling spirit from the massive brandy glasses that were full to the brim. Even those looked like shotglass tumblers in their hands.

Macharius nodded. I accepted the goblet and took a mouthful. The spirit was so strong it burned. I gulped it down and then drank some more. It was like having half a bottle poured down my throat. If I had drunk any faster I would probably have died. As it was, I was not sure I could feel my legs.

Grimfang slapped me on the back. I am sure he was being as gentle as he could, but the force of the blow almost knocked me face first onto the table. 'You can drink, even if you are not a Son of Russ,' he said.

'If I drink any more I will fall head first into that bucket of amasec over there,' I slurred. My vision was blurry. My throat felt raw. I looked around. The generals were all drinking save for Arrian. Sejanus was playing hook-knife with some massive Space Wolf warrior, a very dangerous game when sober, a good way to lose a finger when drunk.

Grimfang threw his arm around my shoulder, drew me closer like an old drinking comrade and leaned forwards, murmuring into my ear.

'You have the smell of an evil woman on you,' he said. 'An assassin and something worse. Be wary,' he said. He pushed me away again, his face as

jovial as a Space Wolf's ever got, leaving me to wonder about the words he had said, or whether I had imagined them.

And that's the last clear memory I have of that evening.

'Kill me now,' I said. The room seemed to be whirling around as if someone had placed a gravitic rotator under my bed. It felt like one of the Adeptus Astartes was banging on my head with a thunder hammer. My throat felt raw. My stomach churned as if I had the Brontovan trots.

'You saw Space Wolves,' said Anton. 'You drank with Space Wolves.'

'You pointed a shotgun at Space Wolves,' said Ivan. 'Your stupidity is impressive.'

'Don't worry. They got their revenge. They decided a bolter shell was too quick, so they tried to kill me with alcohol poisoning. I think they are on the verge of success. Ivan, if I die, you can have my shotgun.'

'I wanted that,' said Anton.

'Ivan, you have my permission to give Anton the shotgun – full bore in the face,' I said. 'Make sure it's loaded with manstopper rounds. You'll need them to breach his thick skull.'

'Hark at the man who tried to outdrink a Space Wolf,' said Anton. 'He is calling me stupid.'

'I wasn't trying to outdrink him,' I said, pausing to throw up in the bucket that Ivan had helpfully placed near my head. 'I just decided it would be more dangerous to refuse than to drink. Of course, I might have been wrong about that.'

'I hope you did not let the side down,' said Anton. 'I would not want them thinking the boys from Belial cannot hold their liquor.'

'Anton,' I said, dry heaving for a bit before continuing. 'Compared to a Space Wolf, a mastodon can't hold its drink. One of them could outdrink an alcoholic ogryn and its inbred cousin, probably its whole alcoholic clan.'

I had flashbacks to last night's drinking session, just images really, because after I had accepted Grimfang's proffered glass my memory of things shattered into a thousand glittering booze-soaked pieces. I recalled the High Command of Macharius's army drinking toasts to the Adeptus Astartes, sensibly using thimble sized shot-glasses of spirit, while the Space Wolves guzzled tankards of the stuff.

I remembered speeches being given and songs being sung, and over

everything a looming sense of unreality hovering. It seemed so unlikely that we could be in the presence of these creatures of legend, that they would be present on the crusade. I remembered howling war cries and tales of battle and a skald singing something in an odd chant that told of ancient battles under bloody suns against foes worthy of Wolves.

I remembered Macharius reeling to his feet and speaking of the wars of his youth, not boasting, simply talking about old comrades, now gone and battles long won. I remembered Drake of all people toasting Macharius and their friendship.

Most of all I remembered what Grimfang had whispered, about the way Anna's scent clung to me. The Great Wolf knew about the Imperial assassin. He suspected her. Not without good reason. The question troubling me was how right was he?

I pushed that aside as something to be worried about another day and lay there and groaned until it was time to take up my duties again.

The meeting chamber was large, but the Space Wolves made it feel small. They had a presence out of all proportion to their surroundings, bristling with an energy that was superhuman, studying us with eyes that were as alien as any xenos.

I looked at them and wondered what they had in common with us. They seemed to have stepped out of an earlier age, one more barbaric and heroic. I have spent most of my adult life fighting the Emperor's wars, and I like to think that few things daunt me, but the Space Wolves did. It was not just their size and strangeness. It was the suggestion that at any moment they were capable of erupting into violence and that it came as naturally to them as breathing. They made me nervous just by being what they were. Fine allies, I thought, but not people I would want to spend too much time around when I was sober. Now that I had had time to consider my actions, I wondered at my temerity the previous day.

Macharius, of course, gave no sign of being intimidated. Of all the people in the room, he was the closest to the Adeptus Astartes. It was not hard to imagine that in a different time or different place he might have been one of them. He had something of their hair-trigger quickness, their supreme self-confidence, their savage capacity for violence. You looked at Macharius and you looked at the Wolves, and you felt their kinship. War was the

element they had been born for. A man fights because he has been chosen or because he must. Macharius and those savage demigods would fight because they loved it.

He sat now on his dais and studied the Space Wolves. They studied him back. They did not need thrones to appear regal. Their natural presence made them seem greater than any noble or any general. Ulrik Grimfang had about him the aura of a particularly savage saint. He stood flanked by a Dreadnought, an ancient living war machine, and a selection of his captains. There was just Macharius and Drake and myself. I had no real idea why I was there. There was nothing I could do to protect Macharius from the Adeptus Astartes if they turned violent. Perhaps my willingness to intervene even with the Adeptus Astartes had impressed Macharius. The cynical part of my mind thought that perhaps they wanted to be sure that what I heard was reported to Anna.

Grimfang cast his eyes around the chamber. ‘It is sealed,’ he said. His harsh, rasping voice carried through the room easily.

‘It is sealed,’ said Macharius. ‘What is spoken here goes no further.’

‘That is well for we talk of ancient and sacred things. If what you say is true.’

‘Insofar as it is possible to be certain, I believe it to be true,’ said Drake. ‘We found the Fist of Russ.’

The Great Wolf looked at him with what might have been contempt. ‘Insofar as it is possible to be certain?’

‘Nothing in this galaxy is certain, save for the Emperor’s Grace,’ said Drake. ‘The Fist has been lost for millennia, stolen by xenos raiders from the Temple of the Storm Wolves on Pelius, sought for thousands of years by the faithful.’

‘And now you just happened to find it?’ said Grimfang. The irony dripped from his fangs. ‘A thing that seers have claimed was no longer to be found in this universe, that all thought lost forever.’

‘We had it in our grasp,’ said Macharius.

‘You had it in your grasp,’ Grimfang said. ‘That implies you lost it.’

‘Our ship made a false jump – we were attacked by the xenos eldar. When we drove them off, the Fist was gone. They have it.’

A frown crossed Grimfang’s brow. ‘If this truly was a relic of the time of Russ it must be reclaimed.’

‘It was ancient and it bore the runes of your order. I can see that just from looking at your armour,’ said Drake. He touched his data-slate. A hololithic image of the object hovered in the air. The Space Wolves looked at it. I could sense the intensity of their scrutiny.

‘It is of the ancient times,’ said the Dreadnought. Its voice was flat, inhuman. It was the sort of voice you would have expected a Titan to have if they could speak. The accents on the words were subtly wrong, as if the speaker had first learned the use of language in a time so ancient that the words were spoken differently. ‘I remember that model. It was fashioned at the time when the primarchs walked among men.’

‘It could be faked,’ said the Great Wolf. ‘There are many such false relics.’

‘Nonetheless,’ said the Dreadnought. ‘If there is even the slightest chance it belonged to the Founder it cannot be allowed to fester in the hands of the eldar.’

Grimfang made a gesture that indicated that so much was obvious.

‘Speak on, in the Allfather’s name! How did you find this Fist when so many others have failed?’

‘The trail was long and dark. We first heard rumours on Celene nearly ten years ago. They told of a lost ship and a mad crew emerging from the warp in a place called Demetrius. I found a codex that described the Fist as a lost artefact of the heroic age of man. We tracked it and we found it.’

‘I have heard such tales before,’ said Grimfang. ‘They have never turned out to be true.’

‘You have seen what we had. You must decide for yourself the course of action you will take,’ said Macharius.

‘If it is a relic it cannot be left in xenos hands,’ said the Dreadnought.

‘It will be found again,’ said Grimfang, coming swiftly to a decision. ‘We shall find it.’

‘I wish to help,’ said Macharius.

‘Help? Us?’ said Grimfang. He sounded as though he wanted to laugh.

‘There is a fleet of xenos, an indeterminate number holding the system. Even a company of Space Wolves cannot be entirely confident of overcoming them,’ said Macharius.

‘If it takes more than a company, I have more,’ said Grimfang.

‘Time is of the essence,’ said Macharius. ‘The world is isolated by warp storms. The eldar come and go as they will, by what means we do not

know. Who knows how long they will be there. I have a ship ready now and I have an army. I have a Navigator who can make the jump. And I have a debt of honour that needs to be repaid.'

I think the mention of the debt of honour swayed them more than the military reasons. It was something they understood. Their whole way of life was built on it.

'Very well,' said Grimfang. 'You may accompany us.'

It should have sounded colossally arrogant; he was *allowing* an Imperial general to accompany his small force, but it did not. It sounded right.

'Anyway, this tale was merely a goat staked out to get our attention. You have other reasons for wishing us here.' He looked directly at Macharius. The Lord High Commander looked back at him.

'The Imperium has been shattered by schism and heresy. It is time to put an end to it and reunite the realms of men under the Emperor's banner.'

'And you are the one to do that, are you, little man?'

'I am the one who has been chosen to perform the task.'

'Others have tried.'

'I have succeeded,' said Macharius. He was not boasting. He was making a statement. 'Everywhere I have fought, I have ended the strife of man against man, world against world, system against system. I have ended the wars of faith and I will add new worlds to the Imperium. I have done this without your aid. I can continue to do it without your aid.'

Grimfang sniffed. He was clearly not used to being talked to in this way. There was suddenly a dangerous tension in his manner. His eyes narrowed and he looked as if he were considering springing on the Lord High Commander. 'And yet we are here, speaking.'

Macharius looked back calmly. 'This will be the greatest war of the newborn millennium. The Adeptus Astartes are already gathered like eagles at the edges of the struggle. They intervene as they like, where they like, when they like. They are a law unto themselves.'

'As they have always been, as they should be,' said Grimfang.

'Indeed,' said Macharius. 'But there are times when greater coordination between our forces might prove useful. There are times when an understanding between us would be helpful. Informally, of course.'

'We do not need to understand you,' said Grimfang.

'I think you do. I think there will come a time when powerful people may

come to you, and the other Adeptus Astartes, carrying tales of me. I wanted you to see me for yourself, to judge me for yourself. I want you to know that I am sincere in what I do, that I wish nothing more than to rebuild the Imperium into what it should be. I want there to be no misunderstanding between us.'

Grimfang looked at him. His nose wrinkled. He sniffed the air. His eyes narrowed. I wondered if Macharius had overstepped the mark.

'There are those who have made fortunes from the chaos. There are those who hold power because of it,' Macharius said. 'They do not wish to see an end to the ages of schism.'

An odd smile twisted Grimfang's mouth. Those monstrous fangs became visible. 'You think we might be numbered among those, do you?'

Macharius shook his head, but for a moment I wondered if he really did think that. Was it possible he saw the Space Marines even as potential disruptions in his master plan? 'No,' Macharius said. 'I do not. As I have said, I want you to understand what it is I do and why I am doing it.'

'I think you achieved that goal,' said Grimfang. He sounded as though, in spite of himself, he was impressed by what he saw when he looked upon Macharius.

'There has been an age of chaos,' said Macharius. 'It must be seen to be ended.'

Grimfang nodded. His head was tilted to one side in contemplation. 'And it will be,' said Grimfang. 'I will send a company of Wolves to watch over you. Logan Grimnar will act as a liaison. He is young and needs seasoning.'

He rose and moved to the door. The meeting was quite clearly over.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Helicon Blight's vessel, *The Pride of Terra*, was an enormous ship, a city floating in space it seemed when I saw it, a world unto itself in many ways. In orbit over Emperor's Glory, it docked with a number of shuttles which carried elements of Macharius's elite Lion Guard.

Vast hangar doors opened in its side to allow the shuttles entrance, and once we were within, tank after tank – Leman Russ, Baneblade, Shadowsword, Chimera – disembarked into the hold. I stood there watching as massive stowage lifts raised them into huge multi-level holding pens. Other cargo bays had been converted into impromptu barracks.

Macharius himself received quarters fit for a planetary governor, and the inner circle of his personal bodyguard such as Anton, Ivan, the Undertaker and myself were installed near him. There were a thousand battle-hardened troops on call. If we had needed to we could have taken over the ship, although what we would have done then eludes me.

The embarking of Macharius's private army was not a quick business. Many shuttles needed to dock. We had most of the day to wait while it was happening. During that time, Macharius kept in touch with Sejanus over the comm-net, giving crisp orders for the disposition of the crusade's forces long term.

He was taking no chances of things not going as he planned in his absence.

Of course, we had to be there to watch the company of Space Wolves

arrive. Anton insisted. We stood on the platform over the docking bay watching their grey-blue Thunderhawks and transit-shuttles arrive. It had taken some quite spectacular feats of bribery on some of the ship's crew to get us there, but we were known to be high in Macharius's favour and that counted for something as well.

It was odd to watch the internal blast doors open and the small fleet of armoured vessels move into the holding chambers and be secured in metal cradles for the flight. It was even odder to watch the Space Wolves at a distance through the stained armourglass windows. In the vast interior of the ship, they lost some of the sense of scale they had close up. In some ways they were just armoured figures moving through routines familiar to all soldiers in transit. They emerged from their vehicles and looked around, studying their surroundings with watchful eyes. It took me a few seconds to realise what they were doing.

They were making sure they knew where every last piece of cover was. It was as if they expected that at any moment the interior of the loading bay might become a battleground and they were not going to be at a disadvantage on it.

By squad they moved to secure a perimeter. Their leaders did not seem to give any orders that I could see. They moved into their positions as if they already knew what to do, with an ease and a fluidity greater than any I had ever witnessed. In the Guard it would never have been so. There would have been confusion. There would have been sergeants bellowing orders. There would have been squads taking up the wrong positions and officers trying to organise the chaos and sometimes making it worse. With the Space Marines below, there was none of that.

Anton made a sour expression with his mouth. 'What's wrong?' I asked. 'Disappointed they haven't killed anybody? There's time enough yet.'

He shook his head. 'I always wanted to see Space Wolves.'

'And now you have. If you're really unlucky, you'll get to fight alongside them too.'

'Yes but…'

His lips compressed and his jaw went tight as he struggled to find the words to express what he was feeling. He didn't really have to. I knew him well enough to know. This was something he had been dreaming about all his life and had never really expected to happen. And now it had, and his

life’s long list of things to be looked forward to had been shortened by one.

‘Lost for something stupid to say, Anton?’ Ivan said. ‘That is a first.’

‘Ha-bloody-ha.’ His voice held a note of frustration as well as disappointment. ‘You think we’ll get to talk to them?’

‘What do you want to talk with them about? You think you’ll exchange war stories? I have news for you, Anton, they might not be as impressed as your noble-born girlfriend by your tales of killing orks on Jurasik.’

He was frowning again, and I could tell he was still struggling with concepts that were not easy for a man like him to get to grips with. He really just wanted to make contact with them, to reach out and touch something greater than human, to speak with as close to a demigod as he was ever going to get. There was a religious component to his awe and his tongue-tiedness.

In the end, he simply turned and walked away, marching shoulders straight into the corridors of the vast starship.

‘I think you hurt his feelings,’ said Ivan, rather mean spiritedly, I thought.

A few hours before we were due to depart, Helicon Blight himself came to pay his respects. He had greeted Macharius temporarily when welcoming him aboard, but this time he brought an invitation to the bridge of *The Pride of Terra* if Macharius wished to witness the ship depart. The Lord High Commander agreed to do so. I am sure he had seen such things before, but I guessed he wanted to see how Blight’s ship differed from others and to gain some insight into the way the rogue trader ran his vessel.

We accompanied the merchant prince to the enormous chamber. It had forward facing armourglass windows through which the blue and green surface of Emperor’s Glory was visible. Over all was a massive throne for the trader to sit upon and positions for his Navigator, astropaths and other senior officers on the ship. We were given pride of place beside the command throne. I was impressed by the way Blight took it for himself without offering it to Macharius. I am fairly certain this was the way protocol dictated, but there are those I have encountered who would have broken those rules in order to curry favour with the master of the crusade.

Macharius studied everything with his usual attention, and I followed suit. There were several massive control altars and lesser thrones for astropaths and other officers. Subalterns and messengers moved around the place.

Tech-adepts made last moment checks on the altars.

The huge arched doorways swished open and Zarah Belisarius entered. Blight held one hand to his comm-net earbead and then said something quietly. It was picked up by the patch microphone on his throat. A few moments later klaxons sounded and warning lights flashed. With no sense of movement whatsoever we were on our way, the surface of Emperor's Glory seeming to slide past through the viewport.

The Navigator strode up to where Blight stood, nodded to Macharius and looked out over the command deck. Once again I was struck by the fact that we were in a different world here, where Macharius's rank and power counted for less. These people saw the world differently, were powers unto themselves, and I suppose it dawned on me then that once again we were, in a very real sense, in their hands. We would never get home without their good will.

'Lord Blight,' said one of the helmsmen. 'I am picking up an unusual drive echo in our wake. It is possible that a ship has left orbit around Emperor's Glory at the same time and on the same course as us.'

I saw Blight look at Macharius and then the Navigator. Some secret appeared to be communicated between them, although I could not guess what. I wondered if Blight knew about the Space Wolves.

'Thank you, Squires,' said Helicon Blight. 'It is probably just another craft making for the out-system jump point, but if it plots an intercept course or shows any sign of threat, speak at once.'

'Aye, sir,' said the helmsman. Blight swivelled his chair and smiled. 'Not much of interest will happen until we reach the jump point now and I hand over control of the ship to Navigator Belisarius. It's a two-day transit until then. Perhaps you would care to retire to my chambers and take some refreshment.'

At Macharius's agreement, he said, 'Mister Blake, the command deck is yours,' and we departed to his chambers in the company of the rogue trader and the Navigator.

If I had been impressed by Blight's chambers before, I was even more so on the second visit, for it turned out that the room in which we had seen him was merely an antechamber, used for conducting business. His apartments were as large as any in the palace on Emperor's Glory and even more

luxurious.

Luxurious divans, upon which Macharius, Zarah Belisarius and Blight lounged, were everywhere. Robed and masked servants brought drinks and food.

Blight raised a glass to good fortune on their voyage, the Lady Belisarius to a safe passage, and Macharius wished them both prosperity. After the formal toasts were completed, Zarah Belisarius said, ‘So you seek to make an alliance with the Wolves of Space.’

Macharius smiled at her. ‘What makes you think that?’

‘We of House Belisarius have ways of hearing about such things. You talked with them on Emperor’s Glory. A halo of prophecy and legend already forms around you. What else could you be looking for?’

‘Who else is aware of your speculation?’ Macharius asked. His voice was very calm, but I had known him long enough to hear the dangerous undercurrents in it. I was not the only one.

‘No one I can be certain of except Lord Blight,’ said Zarah Belisarius. ‘And my cousin Raymond.’

‘Let us say I seek an understanding with them,’ said Macharius. ‘Are you prepared for the passage to Procrastes?’

The fact that he wanted to change the subject was not lost on her. ‘Yes. I am ready.’ She sounded confident.

‘Do you think there is the possibility of anyone being able to follow us?’

‘It is a difficult passage, and no ship with a Navigator aboard skilled enough to plot the transit has been in-system this past few months. I have checked,’ she said. ‘There are not so many great Navigators in the Imperium that I would not learn of their being in the sector. Are you worried about us being followed?’

Macharius shook his head. Zarah Belisarius considered things for a moment. ‘Of course, the Space Wolves vessel would be guided by someone competent to make the jump.’

‘That possibility does not trouble me. I am more concerned with the eldar when we arrive.’

‘If we are attacked I can assure you that *The Pride of Terra* is capable of handling even a fully armed Imperial battleship,’ said Blight. ‘We will not be arriving crippled like your previous vessel, either. We are prepared for anything. With this ship we could take a planet.’

‘Master Blight is correct,’ said the Navigator. ‘This is an excellent ship for the purpose of your voyage, none better in the sector.’

‘Let us hope you are right,’ said Macharius. I was surprised to hear him express such doubts. It was unlike him. Then again, he did not appreciate being in any situation where he was not totally and utterly in control.

‘You will be talking with the Space Wolves en route?’ Blight asked. He was obviously curious. ‘You must have much to plan.’

‘There will be discussions,’ said Macharius, avoiding the question. ‘Plans will have to be deferred until we see what awaits us.’

‘To the success of your plans, then,’ said Blight, raising his glass. They drank to that.

The Pride of Terra emerged from the warp. We were all relieved. In our heart of hearts I think we had all been dreading the possibility of another misjump. No sooner had we arrived than Macharius made his way to the command deck.

Zarah Belisarius and the rogue trader both watched him approach.

‘It is done?’ Macharius said.

‘Done, and done well. We have arrived at the exact coordinates you gave us. Preliminary divinatory sweeps have revealed traces of wreckage, most likely relics of your previous encounter.’

The Navigator looked pale and drained. She was unsteady as she rose to her feet. ‘It was not the easiest of trips,’ she said. ‘There is something about this system that disturbs the currents of the empyrean. The storm seems to be getting stronger. It would be as well to conclude your business here as quickly as possible and be gone. If the storm intensifies further a safe departure may be impossible.’

‘How long do we have?’ Macharius asked. I could see he was already beginning to plan his campaign. He wanted to know exactly how much time was left.

‘A week, at most,’ said the Navigator. ‘I would not want to leave it much longer than that.’

‘We must head in-system as soon as possible,’ said Macharius.

‘I have already laid the course,’ said Helicon Blight.

One of the deck officers said, ‘Lord captain, we are picking up traces of xenos ships. They are on an interception course.’

‘Best strap yourselves in,’ said Blight. He indicated rows of empty seats around the edge of the command deck. ‘It will be a few hours till we are within range, and then things are likely to get hairy.’

‘We must be ready to be boarded,’ said Macharius. Blight grinned.

‘They will not get close enough to board us, Lord High Commander.’ Macharius did not answer. He strapped himself in and waited. We all did the same.

It is an odd and eerie thing to sit on the command deck of a warship during a space battle. Nothing much seems to happen. Officers speak to each other in a clipped fashion. Small lights change vectors within holospheres. Occasionally, you feel a ripple of strangeness as the ship changes direction and the artificial gravity compensates. When things are going well there is no sensation at all, really. When things go badly…

Blight sat on his throne and ordered fighters deployed. The only sign his command was obeyed was when a number of small green dots appeared on the holosphere in front of him, moving on collision course with the incoming eldar.

Occasionally one of his officers would reel off a stream of technical chant and he would respond with a one- or two-word command. ‘Fire,’ or ‘Check,’ or ‘Prepare control.’ I had no idea what he meant, but I felt sure something was happening. In the holosphere things changed colour or vanished. Although no signs were given, out there men and xenos were dying, ancient vessels were being vaporised, terrible things were taking place.

Macharius watched everything keenly, interested as ever in any aspect of warfare. I wondered what he made of this strange silent struggle, in which moves were plotted out long in advance between ships incalculable distances apart.

He probably grasped it instinctively as he did everything connected with warfare, but I could tell he was not enjoying himself. The fingers of his right hand drummed on the arms of the chair into which he had been strapped. Possibly, like me, he was waiting for the familiar shudder that would tell when the ship had been hit, or the flicker of lights that would tell that we had lost a generator. There was not much consolation to be had from the thought that if we took a direct hit to the command deck we would never know. We would be walking in the Emperor’s Light before we even

knew we were dead.

I forced myself to breathe slowly even though I dreaded that each intake of air might be my last. I was all too aware of the sickness in my stomach and the pounding of my heart against my ribs. I told myself that this nauseating fear was a good thing, that at least it was letting me know I was still alive, but it was hard to convince myself of the truth of it. As always, I found myself wishing that we were on the ground, with weapons in our hands and some say over our fates. The simple act of waiting was terrifying.

Eventually, Blight smiled, looked up and clapped his hands. I noticed there was some small difference in the dance of lights in the holosphere. The red dots were retreating, the green ones were returning towards the centre.

'It is done,' said the rogue trader. 'They are in retreat. Victory is ours. We'll be in orbit over the target within twelve hours.'

It seemed that *The Pride of Terra* was every bit as powerful as Blight had claimed. Or perhaps the eldar had retreated for their own reasons and were simply leading us into a trap. I had seen Macharius do similar things many times. I could tell from the expression on his face that he was wondering the same thing.

We would soon see.

It seems the humans have returned. It is not the same ship but one more powerful. It has driven back my fleet and moves arrogantly to take up position in orbit. I wonder as to why there is only one vessel. Is its owner so confident? Or could it be there is no connection between this craft and the one we first encountered.

I reach out and touch the armoured mechanical fist I claimed on the first human ship. I find it oddly fascinating and oddly comforting, a primitive talisman which touches something deep in my soul. It speaks of a world of violence and death and pain. Preliminary tests indicate that it dates to a time around the first manifestations of She Who Thirsts. There are cell fragments within which do not exactly match the basic human genotype. They will bear analysis and may reward us with some smidgeon of knowledge.

I give my attention back to matters at hand. I tell the fleet to fall back and await further instructions, to maintain a safe distance on the far side of the fat moon. I wish to know what these humans are about, and I want them to be ready to strike again once we have taken a proper measure of their

strength.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

We swung into orbit over the captive world of Procrastes. The globe glowed blue and white against the black of space. It looked peaceful, as most worlds do when you see them from space. It was hard to believe that down there, xenos invaders were torturing and enslaving, that soldiers were dying, that weapons of terrifying power were being deployed.

All the long way in past the outlying worlds of the system, Blight's crew had been monitoring communication bleed. They had pieced together more and more information and presented it to Macharius. The invaders were attacking cities by surprise then withdrawing, taking hundreds, sometimes thousands of the population with them, leaving far more tortured and dead.

In the great scheme of things, such numbers were insignificant even on this backwater world, but the effects of the attacks were disproportionate. They generated fear and alarm. They kept forces tied down, protecting their bases and homes, rather than investigating the attackers and responding. I did not have to be Macharius to understand this much. It was self-evident from the digests of information that Blight and his officers presented.

As we watched the planet spin below us, divinatory engines were building a picture of its surface, locating major cities, pinning down the remaining communication sources, compiling as much information as was possible. Macharius had set up a command centre near the bridge of the ship and relays of officers came and went. It was obvious he was preparing to intervene. Every now and again he would stop and speak to Logan Grimnar,

the massive, youthful-looking envoy of the Space Wolves looming over him. Grimnar would growl something into his sealed comm-net channel. Something was clearly developing there.

Macharius seemed particularly interested in one place, a huge valley in the mountains. Long-range images showed a place that looked like it was a sacred site for xenos, with a massive mountain carved to resemble some inhuman face and a cluster of temples in the long cut of the valley beneath. According to his calculations it was the centre of most of the eldar activity.

Drake studied it and said, 'It is an ancient eldar site. I have seen its like before but never so large or so well preserved.'

'This is not an eldar world,' said Macharius. 'Most of those cities are human and almost all of the signal traffic we can decrypt.'

'I doubt the eldar have been here for a long time,' said Drake. 'They vanished from the surface of most worlds millennia ago, leaving only relics, abandoned cities, ruins.'

'What happened to them?'

'No one knows. There was some great catastrophe that destroyed their civilisation.'

'It looks like they have decided to reclaim this world, then,' said Macharius. 'All of the xenos energy signatures we can pick up are centred there.'

'What do you plan on doing about it?' The inquisitor frowned as he studied the map. Macharius had zoomed in to reveal the valley in the mountains, its temples and statues of gigantic alien daemon-gods in greater detail.

'I plan on landing our troops and securing the valley. They do not outnumber us, in fact I suspect there are significantly fewer of them than us.'

Drake shook his head. 'They seek to enslave a world with a few thousand warriors, that is insane.'

'They do not seek to enslave it. They are enslaving a few of the population and tying up what is left of the defences. All of this is a distraction. It must be. They are sowing terror and creating chaos. They do not plan on holding this world or even doing a significant amount of damage to it. They just mean to see that no one interferes with them. They are using speed and momentum and the lack of communications between the world's inhabitants

to give the impression that there are many more of them than there actually are.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘You have studied the report decrypts as much as I, what did you see?’

‘Eldar strike forces slaughtering incompetent militia whenever they liked.’

‘Yes, but look at the pattern.’

‘What pattern?’

‘Attacks are always at least a few hours apart.’

‘So?’

‘With sufficiently swift vehicles, these attacks could be carried out by the same force.’

‘That’s an interesting guess.’

‘It’s not a guess. There are multiple attacks, but if you look at the aggregate reports the numbers never exceed more than a few thousand. The eldar commander is using superior mobility to give the impression of a much larger force than exists down there. He is causing as much chaos as possible. His forces are destroying power cores, communications grids, railheads, space-fields. Any attempts to concentrate forces are smashed.’

‘I will take your word for it.’

‘The valley is central to the continent, capable of being fortified and the one place they could make all their attacks from in the time spans available. Their ships and aircraft always come from there or pass over it.’

‘I believe you, but how are the eldar getting away with it?’

‘The orbital monitors were destroyed in the initial wave of attacks. The defenders are blind. The attackers are not. Nor are we. I can see what the planetary commanders cannot. I have a massed armoured force. We can stop these aliens. We can certainly drive them out of the valley.’

‘That would be a good thing,’ said Drake. There was a note of irony in his voice that Macharius ignored.

‘Yes, it would,’ he said. ‘The eldar headquarters is in that valley. That is where the Fist will be. We can save it from xenos hands and we can bring this world back into the Emperor’s Light at the same time.’

Whatever else you said about Macharius, you could not say he lacked ambition or depth of vision. He had seen multiple opportunities here, and he was ready to grasp them. Drake just looked at him, waiting for him to go on.

‘We are the only humans in the system who can provide intelligence and coordination to the planetary defence, as well as an armoured spearhead capable of standing against the invaders. When we appear it will seem as if the Emperor himself has sent us to deliver this world from its attackers.’

Or if it did not now, it would look that way by the time Macharius had finished. I understood him well enough to grasp that.

‘Are you certain you understand the situation down there correctly?’ Drake asked. ‘What if you are wrong?’

‘Then we will all die. But I am not wrong.’

He spoke with his usual certainty, but I could not help but remember the temple gardens back on Demetrius. He had not been wrong there either, and still we had almost lost our lives.

‘We will make contact with the human leaders, and then we will begin.’

The face of the Tyrant of Kha held a worried expression. It had done ever since he had stepped off the shuttle, surrounded by his retinue. He was clearly afraid and desperate as we ushered him into Macharius’s presence. The Tyrant was a middle-aged man, hair black, sprinkled with silver. His moustache was white. His eyebrows were so black I suspected they had been dyed. He looked quizzically at Macharius. Macharius looked back at him. Grimnar stepped into sight from behind a throne. The Tyrant’s eyes went wide with shock at the sight of a Space Marine.

‘I am the Lord High Commander Solar Macharius,’ Macharius said. ‘I represent the Imperium of Man. I have come to free you from the scourge of the eldar and bring you the Light of the Emperor’s rule.’

The Tyrant looked off to one side, by force of habit glancing at one of his advisors, a good-looking woman only slightly younger than he. Wife or counsellor or both. She made a small hand gesture that might have simply been her fidgeting or might have been a signal. He nodded ever so slightly and looked back at Macharius and said, ‘Any aid against this xenos scourge would be welcome.’

He quite pointedly had not mentioned that the Light of the Emperor’s rule would be received with similar enthusiasm. I guessed he was quite happy ruling his section of the world in his own name. Of course, as far as he was concerned he might soon be the absolute ruler of nothing unless something was done about the xenos. He was quite clearly prepared to accept aid from

Macharius now and deal with the consequences later.

‘When did they arrive?’ Macharius asked.

‘Less than a moon ago. The first we knew was when our vox-grid went dark. It was too thorough to be a simple malfunction. Mere minutes afterwards, raiders hit our outlying cities and knocked out our defence bunkers. Since then they have been attacking our city at will. I have tried to form alliances with my fellow Tyrants in other cities, but the couriers get through only rarely. I was astonished when your emissary managed to establish a link.’

‘We will be using it in the future to coordinate the defence. We should be able to give you some warning of incoming attacks. We have established the fact that the xenos are using a valley in the mountains as their primary base, a relic of blasphemous xenos.’

A confused look passed over the Tyrant’s face. ‘The Valley of the Ancients? That makes no sense. Surely one of the greater city-states would be better.’

It did not suit Macharius to tell him quite how few the xenos were and that they would have difficulty holding down the population of a whole city. ‘I believe it was once a site sacred to their deviant race. Perhaps they have some unholy purpose there. In any case, I intend to cleanse them from it.’

The Tyrant nodded. He was obviously not troubled by the fact that the ancient site was under xenos control. The only thing that meant anything to him was probably that his city-state was the closest major population centre to the valley. This meant, as far as he was concerned, that it was bearing the brunt of the attacks.

‘You wish to use Kha as a staging post for your attack,’ said the Tyrant, who clearly had not got his position by being slow on the uptake.

Macharius nodded.

‘That might draw unwelcome attention to us,’ said the Tyrant.

‘You are already receiving that attention,’ said Macharius. ‘I will end it.’

‘You are very sure of yourself,’ said the Tyrant.

‘I will drive these xenos off,’ said Macharius. ‘I will remember those who aided me. I will also remember those who opposed me. The Imperium is the most powerful force in the universe. It rewards those who stand with it. It punishes those who defy it. It protects its allies. It smashes its enemies.’

The Tyrant looked around. I could practically see what he was thinking.

The ship was impressive. He had been brought the long way from the docking airlock. He had seen how vast it was. He had no idea of how many other ships there might be. Macharius carried himself with superb confidence, and then there was Grimnar. I could tell the Tyrant was wondering if he was really seeing one of the legendary Space Marines of the Adeptus Astartes. Even if one had not been seen in this sector for millennia, they would not have been forgotten.

‘We will of course cooperate in any way possible,’ said the Tyrant. ‘But our forces are shattered and demoralised, and our resources are scant.’

‘We require only a secure place to set down our forces,’ said Macharius, ‘and local guides would be useful. Troops who know the mountainous area leading into the valley.’

‘Such can be provided,’ said the female advisor. I noticed that the Tyrant did not contradict her or object to her speaking. ‘My husband can arrange such things. You will need to provide troops to guard what is left of the space-field perimeter in case of attack. My husband cannot guarantee that our troops could hold it in the face of these inhuman enemies.’

‘The perimeter will be secured by my personal guard until we have landed our armour.’

‘Armour?’ the Tyrant said.

‘We have brought Baneblades, Shadowswords and other super-heavy tanks. My force is entirely mechanised.’

‘And you intend to take it through the mountains to the sacred valleys?’

‘The ways look passable. Are there local conditions I should know about?’

The Tyrant considered this for a moment. ‘The mountains would be a terrible place to be ambushed. There are local tribes, bandits who have swarmed there since the world was first taken by men. They defied our rule. They could never be entirely hunted down or exterminated.’

‘Is that so?’ Macharius said. His face and his voice were bland. I guessed he was interested in these bandits. They might prove more useful allies than the Tyrant and his followers. If those thoughts were running through his mind, he gave no sign of it. ‘I will bear that in mind.’

‘It would be wise to,’ said the Tyrant.

Kha was surrounded by mountains. It lay in a long valley at the roots of the range and the titanic, snow-capped spires looming over it like great white-

haired giants. The space-field had been hit hard by the eldar. I could see burned-out vehicles along the perimeter and ruined control towers where they had struck. I could see Leman Russ amid the rubble, weapons facing outwards as they guarded the landing site where the shuttles had landed.

The old familiar roar of tank engines filled the still, cold air. It made me nostalgic thinking of all the other times I had spent hearing that sound. I had been more than two decades listening to the rumble of mighty engines flood the air of dozens of worlds. The acrid smell of engine exhaust hit my nostrils.

I scanned the sky. Large birds, most likely predators of some kind, hung on the thermals amid the peaks. White clouds smudged the clear blue. The air seemed to have some special quality to it; it was so clear I felt like I could see further than I ever had before. I felt a certain curiosity, I must admit, knowing that somewhere over there was a secret valley occupied by the enemies of mankind. I turned and looked back towards the city.

It was not a hive. It was a massive, tangled sprawl of buildings made from old grey stone. Huge statues rose amid the towers. I could see that some of the buildings had been shattered. Their metal spines were showing. Their structures were scorched black in places as though they had been hit by some powerful weapon and burned. There were crowds of locals around the chain-link fences of the field looking in. I studied them through the magnoculars, ostensibly to check for threats to Macharius's safety, in reality out of simple curiosity.

They had the look of refugees mostly. Their clothes were dirty, their faces had a starved appearance; more than that, there was fear there, a haunted quality that made them look frail and fragile. I thought of what I had seen of the eldar, of how they had tortured and maimed for pleasure, and I tried to imagine what it was like to have been driven out of hearth and home by such creatures and to lie awake at night, under a planetary sky, fearing their return.

'See anything interesting, Lemuel?' Macharius asked. He was standing beside me on the field, looking around with the intense interest he always had when he set foot on a new world. He seemed to be testing the air and the gravity as if they contained information vital to victory. Who knows, perhaps for him they did.

'Refugees, sir, unless I miss my guess. I doubt they are any threat to us.'

‘It tells us something, though, Lemuel.’

‘Does it, sir?’

‘It tells us that the Tyrant and his regime are not terribly well organised or they would have set up shelters and encampments for such people.’ For Macharius, a problem could always be solved by logistics. Or almost always.

‘Perhaps he has, sir. And perhaps those folk just don’t want to stay there. Or perhaps they have come simply to take a look at us. To see what we are like. There might not be much other entertainment for them.’

‘Is that what you think we are for them, Lemuel? Entertainment? We are protecting them and bringing them the Emperor’s Law.’

‘Of course, sir. That too.’ I wondered if Macharius had ever known what it was like to be poor and have no other entertainment save what you saw in the street. The answer was obvious.

‘I will have the quartermaster disburse some ration tabs to the crowd,’ he said. ‘It won’t do any harm to get some of the locals on our side.’

It was typical of him to turn a gesture of charity into a military action. The charity was genuine, I think. But still it was propaganda.

An alien-looking craft, all predatory lines and curves swept over the horizon, ignoring the clouds of anti-aircraft fire that tracked it. I wondered if it was the first of many, but it was only a scout.

Some of our own Lightning fighters scrambled to intercept it. They swept away beyond the mountains and were lost to our sight.

The humans are transporting a force down to the planet’s surface. They have already established a beachhead. Observers have noted a large contingent of their primitive but powerful armour. There is a practised precision about what they are doing that suggests competence and experience. These warriors will not be like the planetary defenders, easy prey to our superior tactics and technology. The warriors appear to be wearing the same green uniforms as those on the ship that escaped. Is it possible that their commander, this Macharius, has returned seeking vengeance? I must see some prisoners are taken and interrogated.

In truth, I would welcome his presence. I like my prey to be challenging. It will help stave off boredom while I wait the last few days for the gate to open. I will take any amusement I can find at the moment, no matter how

petty.

I toy with ordering a strike against them now. It would mean concentrating my force at one point and attacking them when they most expect it, at a place where they would have plenty of human allies to act as cannon fodder. It would mean revealing the true strength of my force, which is smaller than the humans', although doubtless infinitely superior in morale, firepower and tactical ability.

The alternative is to wait. Time is on my side. The longer I wait, the closer I get to the gate opening and the secrets of the ancients entering my grasp. I doubt the humans will arrive before that happens.

Am I willing to defer gratification for so long? I am. Unlike Sileria and Bael and the others I need not give in to the first impulse that enters my mind. That is what makes me a leader and them followers.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Long lines of Imperial armour rumbled along the old road from Kha towards the distant mountains. The tracks churned up the ancient stonework, which had not been made to take the weight of super-heavy battle tanks. I found myself wondering what purpose this road had served. Perhaps it had been a trade artery linking this city-state with another. Perhaps it had provided pilgrims with an access route to the holy valleys. Perhaps there were mines up there and this was a trade route. I studied the road looking for clues, but if there were any I never saw them.

I had plenty of time to think about such things because I was standing behind Macharius in the turret of the Baneblade. He was surveying our surroundings through his magnoculars. He liked to get a feel for the terrain. I worried about the fact that we might see eldar aircraft moving to attack us. On these narrow roads any flyer with sufficiently powerful weapons could wreak terrible havoc. I did not have much fear for the Baneblade. This ancient monster would be proof against most such weapons. But there were other vehicles, packed with troops, which might be vulnerable.

This was good terrain for an ambush. There were many smaller valleys and gulleys leading off from the one that the road ran through. Huge boulders marked the hillside. There were caves up there, and I was sure there were people watching us. I sometimes caught the glitter of the sun on magnocular lenses. I saw signs of stealthy movement that set the hairs on the back of my neck to rising. It might have been some mountain predator,

but I did not think so. I thought there were men in those mountains who were watching us pass through their land.

I thought of what the Tyrant had said about bandits. That did not imply any love was lost between the mountain people and the city-dwellers, and they would know where we had come from. I doubted we had anything to fear from hill-bandits unless we were beaten at the Valley of the Ancients. Irregular troops could make our line of retreat very unsafe indeed. I thought of the effects of demolition charges on these mountain roads, of man-made landslides, of all the things a few determined men could do against an armoured convoy.

I wondered what was going through Macharius's mind. Was this what he had expected to find when he set out? I doubted it. How could he have expected to encounter a force of xenos. He had come prepared for some trouble, though, and I was glad. This was not the usual sledgehammer world-conquering army he would have brought to bear during the course of a normal campaign, but there were enough troops to give me some sense of security and the idea that we would achieve our goal.

I was especially glad of that when I thought about the insanity of the eldar we had encountered, their unending, unrelenting malice and cruelty. I found that despite my horror I was looking forward to reaching our objective. I was looking forward to another chance at killing them.

I looked up at the sky. It was reassuring to think that somewhere in space overhead was a company of Space Wolves ready to drop in and reinforce us. I would have been happier with a Chapter, but you can't have everything.

I wondered what they were thinking. Most likely they planned to drop on the site under cover of our attack and reclaim the Fist. It appeared to be what Macharius expected, and he was usually right about such things.

It seems certain the humans are advancing towards the valley. They have ascertained our position and are moving against us with their cumbersome vehicles. Despite the primitive nature of their tanks, it is nonetheless a formidable force, made all the more so by the presence of the warship in orbit.

The swiftness with which the human commander has assembled his forces and launched them through the mountains is impressive. I am afraid that

dealing with the slow-witted inhabitants of this world has caused me to underestimate humans in general. I confess I am pleased. There is more pleasure to be had from humbling foes who at least have a comprehension of the basic uses of military force.

I am left with several choices. I can cease harassing the primitive cities and concentrate my forces on this new threat. This will give the humans a respite and a chance to organise against me, and most likely they will swiftly realise they have an advantage. Or I can wait for the humans to reach me here and do battle on a prepared ground of my choosing.

The main thing is to hold the valley for the moment. Timing is becoming critical. Soon the gate will open and I wish to be here when that happens. I do not want to surrender any ground to the humans. It would be foolish to allow the prize to be snatched from my hands at this late hour.

Let them come. I have a few surprises in store for them when they get here.

It grew swiftly cold in the mountains once the sun went down. The temperature dropped perceptibly within minutes. Breath clouded in the cold air. We set up camp, the largest and least vulnerable of our vehicles forming a perimeter around our improvised base, turrets turned to face outwards, engines left running to provide warmth. Our scouts had chosen a valley large enough to contain our entire force. It was easy enough to hold each end of it. Lines of fire covered the approaches. Overhead, I caught sight of a sleek eldar craft silhouetted against the moon. A few of our fighter air cover got on its tail and the battle raged on somewhere into the darkness, moving out of sight behind distant mountains. Thunder rumbled and lightning flashed where the conflict continued.

We sat ourselves around a fire, eating rations out of mess-tins. Macharius and Drake sat like common soldiers. It was not just for the sake of morale. It made them less conspicuous targets for any sharpshooter seeking officers to kill. They ate the same field rations with the same cheap Imperial Guard-issue utensils. Back on Emperor’s Glory, they might have the ransom of planetary governors. Here they mucked in with the rest of us.

‘In two more days we should reach the valley,’ Macharius said. ‘We will drive out the xenos and take possession of it in the Emperor’s name.’

‘You think it will be that easy?’ Drake said. There was a troubled

expression on his face. More and more of late it had been there in his dealings with Macharius. If I was not talking about an inquisitor I would be tempted to say it looked as if he were having a crisis of faith. In Macharius.

‘Easy or not, it is what we must do. I have not come so far to fail now at the last hurdle.’

‘Are the maps of the valley the Tyrant gave us accurate enough for our purposes?’

‘They match our orbital divinations in so far as they go. The secret underground routes may prove useful, but I am not counting on them.’

‘That is wise since they may not be secret any longer. The eldar have been in possession of the place long enough to find them…’

‘But they have not, at least not all of them,’ said a strongly accented voice. I looked up and saw a massive bearded man flanked by two members of Macharius’s Lion Guard. More soldiers were with him. One of them said, ‘Speak to the Lord High Commander when you are spoken to.’ He turned to Macharius and said, ‘We found him skulking around the edges of the camp, my lord.’

The bearded man laughed. ‘You found me because I stood up and let you see me, otherwise I could have walked into your camp and taken food from your plates without being noticed.’ The Guard lieutenant turned and looked as though he were about to strike the giant. Macharius raised his hand and said in a level voice, ‘You do not have the look of a thief, sir.’

‘I take what I want from those who pass through my land without my permission,’ said the hill-man. ‘It seems only fair. It is more in the nature of a toll.’

‘Why did you allow my sentries to see you?’

‘I wanted to talk with you, to see what manner of man commands this force. You are moving towards the xenos so that means you are no city-man, certainly not one of Kha. None of them would dare move towards the valley now. The mere thought of those xenos has them shitting in their pants.’

‘And yet you are not afraid,’ Macharius said. The big man laughed.

‘Oh, I am afraid. Any sane man would be of those xenos. They are not like the peaceful beings our legends spoke of. They live to torture and kill, and they have more ways of going about doing so than a Dakathi village woman. The screams that rise from the Valley of the Ancients let us know

that. I have toyed with sending them some of my enemies for their sport, but in the end I found I did not have the stomach for it.'

'You would deal with xenos?' Drake asked. There was a note of soft, purring menace in his voice.

The hill-man studied him, obviously aware of the threat and equally obviously unafraid. He shook his head. 'In the hills we are unkind to our enemies. As unkind as can be. Or so I thought until I saw those eldar. I find at this late hour, and very greatly to my surprise, that there are things I would not do to my worst enemy.' He laughed and shook his head as though he really were surprised to find this thing out about himself.

'You still have not told me why you are here,' said Macharius. Something about his tone suggested that an explanation might well be a thing it was in the hill-man's best interests to provide.

'Our watchers saw you emerge from the city. They saw your ships come down on the field. The people wanted to know who you are and why you have come.'

'We have come from the Imperium of Man to bring the Emperor's Law,' said Macharius. 'We have come to drive back the xenos.'

'You will make war on the eldar?'

'Yes,' said Macharius.

'I will take word of that back to the people of the mountains.'

'Will you aid us?' Macharius asked.

'If you fight against the eldar, we will. If you recognise our ancient claim to these mountains, we will.'

Macharius simply looked at the hill-man. He was turning over possibilities in his mind. I knew he was thinking that he did not know whether the hill-men had a claim to these mountains or not. He took only moments to consider. 'If such claims are just, I will support them.'

The hill-man smiled back at him. 'They are just.'

'That must be decided at a future date after all claims are weighed,' said Macharius. He spoke slowly and clearly, making sure his every word was heard and understood. He was not going to commit himself or the Imperium to anything as small as some hill-man's claim of truth.

'If you are a just man that is enough,' said the hill-man. 'I will carry your word back to the people.' He looked pointedly at the Guardsmen surrounding him. 'With your permission, of course.'

Macharius nodded to them. The hill-man padded off into the night.

‘He may be a spy,’ said Drake.

‘Of course he is a spy,’ said Macharius. ‘But he has not learned anything here that he could not have from watching us from the hills.’

‘On the contrary,’ said Drake. ‘He has learned who our leader is.’

Macharius nodded. We changed our position. That night we slept within the hull of the Baneblade. For me, it was like old times. I found being inside the huge tank reassuring. It had been almost ten years since the destruction of *Old Number Ten*.

For the next two days, as we moved through the mountains we were aware of being shadowed by forces of men. They could not keep up with the speed of moving vehicles, but the road was winding and they seemed able to scuttle directly over the high mountain passes. There was always someone watching us, but they never made a hostile move against us. Eldar flyers assaulted our column but were driven off by our fighter cover.

On the last evening before we reached the Valley of the Ancients, the night was split by columns of light and pillars of fire. Macharius had ordered the bombardment to begin on the eldar in the valley and Blight had obeyed. His ship had taken up a geo-stationary position in orbit and lashed the xenos below.

I stood on a ridge overlooking the valley and studied the fury of the attack. Missiles blew massive craters out of the earth. Energy beams turned gigantic eldar statues cherry-red. There were no eldar to be seen through Ivan’s magnoculars.

‘Blight has probably killed them all,’ said Anton. His voice was flat in direct contrast to his cocky and assured manner.

‘More likely they have taken refuge in the tombs and shrines below,’ I said. ‘They are supposed to run for leagues down there. It’s what we would be doing. I don’t think they are any more stupid than we are.’

‘In Anton’s case that would not be possible,’ Ivan said.

‘Ha-bloody-ha!’

‘They’ll come back out when we get there, no doubt,’ said Ivan. The light reflected on the metal of his face, making it look like some daemonic mask.

‘Can’t say as I am looking forward to facing them,’ said Anton. It was probably the first time I had ever heard him admit such a thing. There was

something about the xenos which spooked even a man of his limited imagination. I ran the magnoculars over the valley again. Some of the grounded eldar vehicles lay like smashed insect carapaces on the valley floor. It looked like the barrage was not completely worthless.

I felt an elbow nudge me in the ribs. Ivan was pointing at something, and I glanced in the direction indicated. I could see we were not alone on the ridge. There were groups of figures standing amid clusters of boulders, watching the hellish firestorm below. It took me a moment to realise that they were not our troops, but groups of hill-men, come to observe this demonstration of monstrous power. They did not do anything threatening, but it was worrying that they had managed to take up their positions so close without us noticing till the last second.

I tried to tell myself it was because all of our attention had been focused on the valley below, but that was not reassuring. I should not have allowed myself to do that, to concentrate on one thing to the exclusion of all others. Such a lapse could easily get all of us killed.

I turned the magnoculars on the hill-men. They were all robed and cowled and carried autoguns and lasguns. Their attention was as focused as ours had been on the valley below, but always in the groups at least one of them was on sentry duty and looking in our direction. I doubted that we would be taking any of them unaware. I thought about what they were doing. Maybe they had come to watch the slaughter of the xenos, but it was just as possible that they wanted to witness the effect of the bombardment. It would enable them to judge the weaponry we had available to us and its effectiveness.

In this they would perhaps be foolish. It would not be a wise thing to judge the might of the Imperium by the barrage laid down by a single ship, just as it would be foolish to judge the strength of its armies by the size of the bodyguard Macharius had brought. Then again, these were the only indicators the hill-men would have to work with.

They did not appear hostile. Given the behaviour of the eldar, that was understandable. I doubted the xenos wanted human allies, and it was very unlikely they had done anything to endear themselves to the hill-men. Quite the opposite seemed likely. Not that it mattered. The attack was going to come soon. Sooner, in fact, than I anticipated.

The ground shakes. Buildings glow with a cherry light as the fury of the orbital bombardment descends upon them. There is a certain primeval loveliness to the effect. Nonetheless, I am glad I have ordered my warriors to await the conflict deep beneath the earth or dispersed them through the mountains far from the points of impact. They move quickly and once the bombardment ends will be able to return in force.

They intend to clear the ridges around the valleys and occupy them, so much is obvious. I will let them take the heights for a time. The entrances to the valley are narrow and provide a choke point where I can ensnare my enemies. Once they are in, they will not find it quite so easy to get out.

The trap is set. I will let these presumptuous mon-keigh enter the valley, and once they are within, my forces will emerge from beneath ground and the surrounding mountains and trap them. Our fleet will make sure their warship cannot intervene. This valley will be their graveyard.

I watch the bombardment continue. It is as I suspected. They are not hitting the valley with the full force of their weapons. For whatever reasons they wish to spare the buildings, or perhaps take us alive. There is no other reason so powerful a force would have been dispatched to assault the valley. They could just have bombarded us from orbit. Perhaps they realise how deep this complex runs. There is no way even the most persistent onslaught from orbit could affect us in the depths. Indeed, the great temple I have chosen as my headquarters is strong enough to withstand the bombardment easily. The massive external walls are warmed by the blasts, but the effects are barely felt within at all.

All they can hope to do is keep us underground while they advance. The bombardment will have to cease at some point to allow the human troops to proceed. When that happens we will emerge and slaughter them.

Soon my ships will engage their warship, and this time it will be in earnest. The humans will have no way to retreat off-planet. The time will soon be here when this farce will be ended.

We had no sooner returned to camp than we were told to report to the command vehicle. We raced there and clambered up the side of the Baneblade. Macharius was waiting, looking relaxed.

‘We are going to attack tonight,’ he said. We all of us looked at him. It was pointless asking why. He was the commanding officer and in no way

obliged to explain his decisions. I thought about all the trouble we had gone to setting up camp, building perimeters, setting sentries. We were in a camp which had given every indication of settling down for the night. Doubtless that was what any enemy scouts were intended to think. It even explained why we had been given leave to go off and observe the valley. Our enemies would anticipate that the barrage would rumble on all night and the attack would come at dawn.

Macharius returned to studying his maps. There were three ways into the valley, only one of which was suitable for super-heavy tanks. It was not a situation that Macharius would like. It made his approach too predictable. At some point the bombardment would have to cease and the enemy would know only too well where to mass its firepower to meet us.

I was surprised to hear orders sending masses of the armour to the east, to an approach where the valley's entrance was a choke point through which our largest vehicles could not pass. I wondered briefly whether Macharius had gone insane. I could see the others had too. Maybe he knew something we did not. Maybe he intended to place us on the slopes overlooking the valley where we could fire onto the enemy within. I slid behind the controls of the Baneblade, invoked the rituals and listened to the thunder of the drives as they fired up.

It was going to be a long night.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I was back behind the controls of the Baneblade when we moved off, our force divided into three parts. At least half our number were taking the obvious route, the one accessible even to the heaviest of vehicles, the main road that led into the east of the valley. Two smaller flanking forces were moving up narrow roads in the hillside on either side of the main road. Artillery was to deploy on the heights overlooking the eastern edge of the valley. Air cover was being held ready for the moment when the barrage ended and the enemy emerged.

We headed to the eastern entrance to the valley, and our vehicle was in the fore. The command Baneblade was even more heavily armoured than a normal super-heavy tank, and Macharius always liked to lead from the front. I did not see what good it was going to do. Once we reached the narrow defile we would be like a cork in the neck of a bottle, stoppering the advance of every tank behind us.

Still, it was not for me to doubt Macharius. I concentrated on the path ahead. At first it was wide. Rocks cracked beneath our treads and the Baneblade rocked from side to side on the uneven ground. I turned us into the defile that led into the valley, and the walls of the cliffs closed in around us.

Down the line of the defile was a narrow slit through which an angry sky was visible. It looked barely wide enough for a man to walk through, but that was just me projecting my knowledge of its narrowness.

The lightning of the barrage split the night, turning the sky brilliant momentarily and then leaving everything seem darker, as if the onslaught itself cast a vast shadow over the mountains.

In the distance, I briefly saw a distant peak illuminated by one mighty flash before it turned once more into a massive, ominous bulk.

There was another flash, more brilliant than the last, and the ground shook as if we were in the grip of an earthquake. The Baneblade shivered.

And then all sound seemed to cease. The world was suddenly appallingly quiet after the thunder of the great explosion. I felt the pounding of my heart in my chest. I became aware of the Baneblade's engines once more, and all the normal sounds you hear in the interior of an Imperial battle tank. All of them felt shockingly loud as my mind sought to adjust to the comparative quiet.

I looked again, and it came to me that the mouth of the defile had suddenly widened.

'Increase speed to maximum, Lemuel,' said Macharius. I did as I was told.

Objects started to ping off the front of the Baneblade, making a grating sound. Something slowed us, and I realised we were encountering physical resistance as we smashed through large boulders and chunks of rock and broken statues, some of which we were grinding to dust beneath our treads.

I concentrated on holding our line. I could hear Macharius responding to incoming reports over the comm-net, and it dawned on me what he must have done. The bombardment had been concentrated near the cliffs overlooking the valley entrance. Under cover of it, siege engineers had been rushed forwards and planted demolition charges. The charges had detonated, opening the bottlenecks and leaving only rubble, which could be pushed aside by a sufficiently powerful vehicle such as a Baneblade.

We had gained an entrance to the Valley of the Ancients. I wondered how much good it would do us. Suddenly, contrails of fire lit the night. Thunderhawk gunships were dropping like meteors from orbit to aid us. The Space Wolves rode trails of plasma down from the sky in search of battle. Their course would take them somewhere into the middle of the valley.

It was as I had suspected – they were using our attack to cover their own.

The bombardment has stopped. That means the attack will soon begin. I

smile, thinking about the trap I have prepared for these arrogant interlopers. Soon they will learn the meaning of terror. Soon I will feast upon their delicious agony.

I notice the changes in the topography of the map. My opponent is clever. He has used explosives to blast a clear path into the valley at what should have been a choke point. He has outfoxed himself. My plan does not rely on choke points. It relies on letting my foe into the Valley of the Ancients, on leading him on and letting him think he is victorious, only to crush him at the moment when he believes victory is within his grasp.

It has always been my greatest pleasure to lead my foes on like this. There is something that appeals to the vanity of every commander, to think that he is crushing his enemy; so few of them realise that they are not as clever as they think.

It is a mighty force my enemy has assembled. I can see the blocks that represent massive armoured vehicles moving into the valley and taking up position on its edges. They are getting ready to pour a hail of fire onto what they think are defenceless targets. I have left enough of my force within the valley to lend plausibility to this interpretation of the data. In truth, I do not have enough warriors left here to oppose my enemies directly, although I have a contingency plan in mind should things go wrong. All we really need to do is withdraw beneath ground into the subterranean labyrinth that runs so far beneath the temple complex.

I order my warriors to open fire on the incoming enemies. We must put up at least a token show of resistance in order to draw them in. They will be expecting some opposition and some opposition they will have.

I feel a surge of glee when I contemplate the punishment I will inflict upon these arrogant vermin. I will have their commander within my grasp. I have given orders to ensure that he is preserved so that I may feast upon his life force as it slowly drains away under my torture implements. Such a consummation is to be devoutly wished for.

The ground vibrates. The roar of weapons fills the air, audible even through my helmet. It is a reminder that battles are not followed merely in the mind, that all of those symbols dancing in the air in front of me represent real objects, real people, real bodies being reduced to pulped flesh and jellied bone.

Part of me wishes to rush out there into the chaos of battle and reap lives. I

tell myself that there will be time enough for that later, that I must content myself with more intellectual pleasures at the moment.

I notice something new. On the display, flickers of yellow light are descending upon the valley from above. This is not at all what I expected; not cumbersome armour and fast-moving air support but something else.

The flickers descend with awesome speed. Their descent is aimed at exactly this temple, as if they knew where my headquarters was and intended to take it.

I contemplate the possibility of treachery and dismiss it immediately. None of my warriors could possibly have had anything to do with these human apes. Could prisoners have escaped? Impossible! Perhaps some of the primitives above have scouted out our positions. There are tribes in those hills who spy on us. Even so, how could they know where I was? It is most likely pure chance. Nonetheless, it could prove fatal.

In the time it has taken me to assemble these thoughts, the attackers have completed their descent and I can detect the stutter of weapons on the roof of the temple complex. I hear screams and howled war cries. It looks as though I will get my wish after all; there will be some physical combat. I smile and unlimber my weapons. It will be a pleasure.

Looking down into the valley I saw the gods. Some of them glowed from the heat absorbed from orbital las-hits. They shimmered in the gloom. There were dozens more of them, carved from stone. In the darkness they were massive presences, humanoid, gigantic; something from a time before men had walked this world, when it had belonged to others, not as we.

The largest statues stood on a massive plinth in the centre of the valley, at the exact central point. To the north, a vast face had been carved into the side of the mountain. It looked down on everything, a blank, inhuman, mocking mask. Sheer cliffs surrounded the valley. In alcoves carved in their rock faces, more alien gods stood. Three massive temple buildings, curved in the eldar fashion, dominated the north-west, north-east and southern parts of the valley.

I could see that the gods were not human and had not been carved by human hands. They were the gods of our enemies.

At least there were similarities between them and the tall, spindly and dynamic creatures emerging from the mouths of the temples in which they

had sheltered. The statues suggested their grace and beauty; what they lacked, though, was their evil. These gods were benevolent – their postures and expressions, even visible only for seconds, suggested that. You could not picture them torturing their foes for pleasure. They were the deities of a peaceful people, not the cruel monsters we faced this night. Those things were as different from the people who had made the stone gods as dark from light. Something terrible had happened somewhere to effect this transformation.

Such thoughts flickered through my mind as I watched the eldar prepare to fight us. Their vehicles were fast and light, and they moved through the air. Some of them looked like ships that might once have sailed upon the sea. Some of them were gigantic, organic-looking war machines that reminded me of Imperial Walkers. With the speed of lightning and the precision of a cast thunderbolt, they arced towards the main entrance to the valley, where our force was ready to meet them.

Sporadic fire began to light the valley, and the statues became ever more visible in the light of rocket flare and muzzle flash. The Space Wolves had dropped onto the roof of the eastern temple. I could see the flash of weapons fire from there. Thunderhawks were moving down the valley, strafing as they went.

That eastern valley entrance became a killing ground where xenos weapons unleashed bursts of fire. The main battle tanks in the lead took them and endured, surviving the initial onslaught. A wave of lighter xenos vehicles surged into them, deploying alien infantry who attempted to break into the vehicles over which they swarmed. I shuddered when I thought of facing those deadly creatures in the confines of a tank. It did not matter that the restricted space would reduce their advantage of speed and mobility. The idea of being trapped in a tight space with one of the eldar filled my soul with horror.

Macharius gave the order to open fire. From the heights on the east of the valley, a withering wave of fire smashed into the eldar. They did not have the durability of Baneblades. Those opening salvoes from lascannons carved huge holes in their ranks, smashed vehicles, tossed bodies into the sky and sent them sprawling dead in blast craters. The spearhead of our column broke out into the valley. More and more of our troops followed us in and spread out to engage the enemy. As the frontage of our formation

increased, so did the overwhelming amount of firepower we could deploy.

It gave us an advantage. The main force moved down into the valley firing as it came. Our artillery laid down a curtain of fire from the heights. Our own vehicles rumbled forward, blasting away. Some of the eldar dived into the temples, taking cover there.

The rest of the xenos retreated swiftly towards the far northern end of the valley, beneath the gaze of that great carved face, skimming swiftly above the ground with a speed we could not hope to match. I half expected them to turn at bay, but they did not, Instead they raced out over narrow paths where we could not hope to follow them through or became airborne and vanished into the night.

I heard cheering over the comm-net at how easy our victory had proven. Once again, Macharius had triumphed. I glanced over at him and I noticed he was frowning. I wondered whether he was disappointed because it had been so easy or whether some new problem had suggested itself to his keen mind.

Looking down into the valley, I saw nothing but broken vehicles, broken buildings and broken bodies. The eldar had vanished like daemons into the night, leaving behind only the glowing statues of gods they had once worshipped and which they had now abandoned.

Our assailants are sweeping across the roof of the temple complex, driving my warriors out of their prepared positions and actually killing them. I can hear the surprised reports over our communications channels. This was not what my people expected at all. Instead of slow, fallible humans, they have encountered something far more dangerous.

I suspect I know what that is. I have only a few more moments to wait before I can confirm it.

It seems that there will be a worthwhile challenge involved in this after all, that there will be some glory to be gained. Fortunately, it does not interfere with the implementation of my master plan. I always intended to abandon this command bunker and retreat beneath ground to join my reserves there. This merely complicates the matter. I am not too troubled. One should never expect one’s plans to survive contact with the enemy. That is a maxim that any commander should live by.

I hear the sound of a controlled explosion. I hear the sound of crystalline

armour shattering. I hear the sound of an eldar dying. I catch the scent of something more than human. I look up and I see a massive armoured figure entering the room. It is too big to be a normal man; it bears some resemblance to one but also to a savage war-beast. In one hand it holds a chainsword, in the other a primitive weapon called a bolter. It raises the weapon and points it at me. I throw myself to one side and the shot passes through the air where I was. It howls with a mixture of rage and frustration, an animal cry that lets me know this is one of the so-called Wolves of Space. In truth, it is worthy of the predatory cognomen. Its features suggest the lupine, its mouth is disfigured by bestial fangs; its eyes reflect the light like those of a dog.

The shell embeds itself in the breast of one of my lieutenants and explodes a microsecond later. In that time I have covered the ground towards the Space Marine, for that is what this creature is. I slash at it with the razor-sharp claws of my gauntlet but somehow it avoids me. I'm impressed. It has been a long, long time since anything has managed to do that. It speaks well for the reflex speed of this augmented humanoid.

It lashes out at me with the chainsword. I leap over the blade, feeling the faint vibration in the air as it passes beneath my feet. I reach out and slash the human's cheek. This time I make contact and the venom in my gauntlets takes effect. I can see that the Space Marine is not as affected as he should be. Something in his system is already starting to compensate for the effects of the poison, but, for a fatal instant, he is slowed down just enough for me to pull out his eyes.

Even then he does not react as a normal human would. He continues to sweep the air before him with his blade, hoping to strike me as part of the pattern. I drop to the floor beneath his area of attack and sweep his legs out from underneath him. I roll one side to avoid the blade as it falls, biting chunks out of the stone of the floor. I turn, put my gun against his head and trigger it. Flesh shreds, reinforced bone resists, brain explodes outwards. I flip myself back onto my feet and glance around, taking in the scene.

More and more of the Space Marines are pouring into the room, more and more of my warriors are moving to meet them. An enormous melee swirls through the chamber. At the moment it looks as though my people can win, but who knows how many more of the human warriors are waiting out there. This is a distraction I cannot afford at this stage of the battle.

Smoke starts to fill the room as equipment catches fire and grenades take effect. The clouds seem too thick and dense for the amount of flame. Some of those thrown missiles are producing the smoke, and it does not take me long to understand why. The Space Marines are capable of finding my people in the obscuring mist. Obviously they are using senses other than sight.

I order one of my squads to fight a holding action while the remainder retreat beneath the earth. I make sure I am in the vanguard. It is senseless for a commander to put himself in the way of danger when there is a battle to be won.

Behind me the sounds of combat fade. I race down the long ramp into the cold darkness beneath the temple complex. I feel the faintest tinge of anger begin to colour my mood. Things have not gone as exactly as I expected. Still, at least I am alive to correct my mistakes. Let the humans enjoy this small victory. In the end it all plays into my hands.

Dawn showed we were completely in possession of the valley. The only signs the eldar had ever been here were their wrecked vehicles. They lay like broken-backed beetles, sparkling in the sun, the flicker of strange energy discharges dancing over their shattered hulls. Our own tanks had once again formed a perimeter, facing outwards, ready to confront any foes. I knew the hill-men were up there watching us, and I strongly suspected the eldar would be there too.

Macharius and Drake stood atop the hull of the command Baneblade. Storm troopers and Macharius's own personal guard surrounded them as they surveyed the battlefield.

'So, Macharius, once again you are victorious,' said Drake. There was no irony in his voice.

'I would not be so certain if I were you,' said Macharius. I glanced over at him once more. It was not like him to express any doubt whatsoever, particularly not when he could be overheard. I came to the immediate conclusion that he wished to be, and that he wanted us to be on our guard.

'The eldar have fled,' said Drake. 'We are left in possession of the field, or rather the valley.'

'Any foe who can flee so swiftly can return just as quickly,' said Macharius. 'The xenos commander saw that the advantage lay with us and

did what was needed to neutralise that advantage.’

‘Surely he fled because he knew he could not win?’

Macharius shook his head. ‘He just wanted to minimise his losses. He knew that we had as many circumstances in our favour as we were ever going to have, and he simply chose not to face us on our own terms. By fleeing now, he ensures he can return at a time of his choosing with most of his force intact. In this case the advantage lies with the most mobile force, and they are far more mobile than we are. The best thing we can do is get ready for their return. Also there are an indeterminate number of eldar in the tunnels beneath us. A coordinated attack from the two factions will be devastating.’

‘You are certain that they will attack again?’

‘They are here for a reason. If they have not yet found what they were looking for, they will be back.’

‘I sense strange energies in this valley. They are growing minute by minute and hour by hour.’

Again Macharius looked troubled. He glanced across at the temple around which the Space Wolves were encamped. There was one objective that was secure at least. ‘The eldar will not give up without a greater battle than this one. I wouldn’t, and I have a sense of their commander’s mind now. He will not give up either.’

‘We should investigate the valley, then, to see if we can find what we came for while there is still time,’ said Drake.

It seems I have escaped from the Space Wolves. They have seized my old command bunker and are securing the perimeter. It almost makes me laugh.

In the days we have been here we have had enough time to map a large part of this labyrinth. It fits the ancient building schemata used by our ancestors, so our predictive systems have no difficulty in providing us with guidance through the maze. I have enough troops down here to open up a second front when the time comes. My basic plan of trapping my enemies in the valley is still a good one. But I can foresee some difficulties arising in the not too distant future.

The humans need to be kept from the gate until it is opened and I can pass through and find what I seek. The presence of the Space Wolves is also an unforeseen complication. Given the nature of their senses they may well be

able to hunt my people through the labyrinth. We need to be prepared for this.

I run my mind back over the initial stages of the battle. I wonder if perhaps I was not too quick to abandon my prepared defensive position. After all, I have no real idea of how many of the Space Marines are up there. I was merely taken aback by the suddenness of their appearance. Is it possible that I panicked? I dismiss the idea. In any case, it does not matter now. The Space Marines are providing the rest of the humans with the opportunity to advance into the valley and seize the central temple complex.

Everything will have to wait until I implement phase two of my plan. I glance around at this ancient chamber with its murals depicting the insipid faces of forgotten gods, and I look at the surviving members of my personal guard. Their faces are masked, but I can sense them watching me, judging me, trying to decide whether I should be replaced. Let them try! They shall discover exactly how deadly I can be. It is only a matter of time before those gibbering apes on the surface find that out as well.

Grimnar and a squad of his Space Wolves stood watch over the entrance to the northernmost temple complex. It was obvious now what the Space Marines had been doing during the attack. They had secured the entrance to the part of the valley Macharius most wanted to hold. As ever the Lord High Commander's plans had plans within them.

'Did you get the Fist?' Macharius asked as he clambered down from the Baneblade and marched up the steps of the temple.

Grimnar shook his head. 'We have not found it yet, and the eldar have scuttled into the depths below. We will soon hunt them down.'

Within the walls of the temple a massive ramp led down into the vast underground complex. All around us tech-adepts and soldiers were manhandling massive bits of technical equipment into place. It seemed that this was going to be our new field headquarters. Heavy weapons were being set up on the roof, along with communications dishes and divination arrays.

He turned and said, 'Have you made contact with *The Pride of Terra*?' to a communications adept.

'No, sir,' the adept responded. 'Not since the reports of the attacks came. It's all static, as if it's being jammed or as if…'

The adept clearly did not want to say what was on his mind so Macharius

finished his sentence for him. ‘As if the ship has been destroyed.’

‘We have lost contact with *The Pride of Terra*?’ Drake asked as he entered the chamber.

‘It was attacked by eldar ships,’ said Macharius. That was a very ominous thought indeed. We might be stranded here on this alien world without orbital support.

‘At least if we are stranded here, so are the eldar,’ said Macharius. He was trying to make the best of the situation.

‘Unless they have some way of travelling we don’t know about,’ said Grimnar.

Macharius looked at him. ‘Do you have something you would like to share with us, Space Wolf?’

The Adeptus Astartes showed his teeth in a grin that was anything but reassuring. I wondered if his Chapter were like orks. With them a smile is a gesture of menace, like a wild beast showing its fangs.

‘There are tales in the sagas of them coming and going in a strange fashion. I have heard tell that the xenos travel strangely through underpaths of the universe, fault lines in space-time that they alone know of.’

‘I have heard similar theories,’ said Drake as though reluctant to admit to such knowledge.

‘I am more concerned with what we seek,’ said Macharius eventually. ‘The Fist of Demetrius.’

‘You have not found it?’ Drake asked.

‘I have caught its scent dimly,’ said Grimnar, ‘as though it had been here and removed.’

‘Perhaps they want to pollute it with their foul presence.’

‘Perhaps they are here for an entirely different reason,’ said Macharius. ‘It is not safe to assume that their motivations are anything like our own. The main thing is to keep them from getting it.’

‘Perhaps what we need is a prisoner,’ said Grimnar. He looked at Drake. ‘You are a psyker… You could question it.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Drake. He did not sound at all keen on the idea.

‘We’ll see what we can do about that,’ said Grimnar.

‘Let’s take a look at what we came for first,’ said Macharius. He indicated the ramp that led away into the shadowy gloom below us.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINETEEN

We moved cautiously down into the labyrinth. The entrance was flanked by two massive statues depicting semi-naked eldar, one female, one male. Their faces both possessed an androgynous beauty. Their lobeless, pointed ears and almond-shaped eyes distinguished them from humans as much as their taller, much more slender forms. They looked like skinny people who had been stretched on a rack, and yet somehow were still beautiful.

Anton and Ivan and I moved along in advance of Macharius, and we were wary. The Undertaker looked as though he were out for a stroll. The green-tunicked soldiers of the Lion Guard looked nervous. Space Wolves ranged ahead of us and behind us. Their keen senses would be able to detect a threat long before we could. Their presence was reassuring.

There could be many of the xenos lurking in the shadows, waiting to catch interlopers unawares. After the Space Wolves had cleared the area, the route had been checked out by companies of infantrymen, agents of Macharius's security detail and Drake's storm troopers, and still it did not feel quite right. We had seen how swift and agile those eldar were, and I did not doubt they would be able to hide in places that were inaccessible to men.

The complex was huge, a veritable labyrinth buried within the rock of the surrounding mountains. All of the tunnels appeared to interconnect with the different temples. It felt as if the whole complex were an iceberg in the oceans of Jotungarth: nine-tenths of it was beneath the ground. The corridors went on for kilometres, opening into huge vaults and enormous

pools of steaming, sulphurous water.

There were signs in xenos hieroglyphics and in the local variant of Imperial Gothic script. There were bridges over vast canyons. Crossing them looking down, you could see reddishly glowing magma so far below that the pools looked like pinpricks. Preliminary scanning had indicated that there were sealed chambers and secret rooms and passages.

The interior of the labyrinth was cool and shadowy. Statues lined the walls. Some of them were smeared with colour as if dyed by recent offerings. I wondered what was going on. It seemed unlikely that those cruel eldar would worship these benevolent deities. Could it have been the humans who had previously held the valley?

Everywhere there were statues of the alien gods. The statues depicted more and more deities. The further we went into the temple, the more lewd and strange looking they became, as if the sculptors had started with an ideal of purity and fell into a reverie of lust as the years went on. It was disquieting. Some of the beings at the back of the temple looked like they might be worshipped by the xenos we had fought, if those creatures were capable of worshipping anything. Or perhaps I was simply projecting my human attitudes onto minds too alien to comprehend.

I studied the galleries above us, looking for anything unusual. I saw only men in the uniform of the Lion Guard keeping watch. I did not relax any. I kept my grip tight on the shotgun. If we were going to meet any eldar I wanted to be ready for violence.

Macharius studied our surroundings carefully as we marched. I was not sure what he was looking for. He seemed fascinated by the eldar statues and images, and he gazed in wonder on the gigantic vaults in the temple depths. Some of the statues to be found in them were ceiling high and as big as those out in the valley. I marvelled at the amount of work that had gone into their creation. They were fantastically beautiful, and the level of detail was just as great on the largest as on the smallest. Drake noticed my gaze and guessed my thoughts. ‘The eldar live longer than humans,’ he said. ‘Their artisans are very patient and very skilled, and they tend to have a singularity of vision.’

I looked at the statues and I thought about the eldar we had fought. ‘It does not seem possible that these were made by the same people as wait for us outside the valleys.’

Drake laughed. ‘It does not seem possible that the same species could worship the Emperor and yet also worship daemons, but it is true. Evil does not preclude intelligence or artistic talent. Sometimes it seems to encourage it.’

I shrugged and opened my mouth to speak, then closed it again. Macharius noticed and so did Drake. ‘You were going to say something, Lemuel,’ said the Lord High Commander. ‘Spit it out.’

I tried to put my finger on my reservations about what we were seeing. I looked up at the gigantic, joyous and benevolent figure gazing down on me. I thought about the spindly, malevolent beings we had fought. ‘The eldar out there are insane, and utterly focused and single-minded about fighting and torture and death. All the evidence we have seen points to this. It’s like they have cut everything else out of themselves. The statues we see here cover every facet of experience: happiness, sadness, joy, laughter, sorrow. We see none of that in them.’

‘I doubt you see much comedy on a battlefield, Lemuel,’ said Drake. I thought about Ivan and Anton and others I had known, and the way joking kept them sane in the face of horror, but I did not say anything. ‘We are seeing only one aspect of the eldar we face.’

‘I see what Lemuel is getting at,’ said Macharius. ‘It does not seem like the same beings made these statues as flayed those people.’

Drake smiled his superior smile. ‘Heretics do terrible things too. Does that mean humanity can’t produce artists?’

‘Are you saying heretics are the same as normal citizens of the Imperium?’ Macharius countered.

‘No, they are deranged.’

‘Is it not possible the eldar out there are deranged in the same way?’

‘We don’t know, and the only way we will find out is by interrogating one.’

‘I doubt your methods of questioning would make them significantly less grim,’ said Macharius.

‘I think that would be a good thing,’ said Drake. There was a trace of black humour in the statement. Before Macharius could reply, Grimnar suddenly froze. ‘There are eldar close,’ he said. ‘Be wary.’

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than we saw long, lean shapes slinking out of the shadows, weapons ready. They unleashed a volley of

shots. They flickered through the air all around us, somehow not touching us. At first I wondered whether they were really such poor shots, and then I noticed the nimbus of light which played around Drake's head.

I glanced around and saw men lying on the ground, their faces pale rictuses of agony. Drake's shield had deflected the eldar's shots away from those immediately surrounding Macharius but had cost the lives of other bodyguards. When I looked up, the eldar were gone. So were Grimnar and his Wolves.

'What has become of the Space Wolves?' I asked.

'They have gone hunting,' said Macharius.

'Let's hope they do not find themselves the prey instead,' said Drake.

We fight a war in this underground maze. I have set my warriors to ambushing the humans in an effort to discourage them from spending time here, and in order to keep them away from the gate. It does not seem to be working terribly well. I suspect that is only to be expected given the way things have gone so far. The universe clearly does not wish to present me with any easy triumphs.

We have set traps en route to the lairs we have chosen, and we keep moving in an effort to confuse those who hunt for us. In the meantime I have worked to re-establish communication both with our forces on the surface and in orbit. So far, things up there are going better than things down here.

Our ships have engaged the enemy warship and it looks as though there is very much the possibility of victory this time. Our captains know what to expect and have not been taken off guard. On the surface, in the mountains, the army that had been tied down besieging the human cities is assembling alongside those forces I dispersed to avoid the orbital bombardment. It is only a matter of hours before they are in position to swoop down on the humans and punish their temerity.

For now, I must see to it that my forces below ground are preserved. The gate will be opening soon and that means I must be prepared to act quickly when the opportunity presents itself. I give my attention to one of the humans I have captured. It looks at me, eyes wide with fear. I am hungry and it has been some time since I have had any nourishment. I pull out my toolkit and prepare to feed.

‘This place feels odd,’ said Drake as we entered the deepest part of the labyrinth. ‘Strange psychic currents swirl in the air here. This is the centre of the psychic disturbance.’

‘I will take your word for that, my friend,’ said Macharius.

‘You would be well advised to, Lord High Commander.’

‘Your teams claim there were signs the eldar had been here in strength.’

‘We found flayed corpses and the bodies of those who had died under torture. It seemed reasonable to believe the eldar made use of this place.’

‘Why do they do it?’ Macharius asked. He sounded genuinely baffled. ‘Why do they indulge in such a despicable practice?’

‘Because they are deviant xenos scum,’ said Drake. There was no real anger or horror in his voice. He was simply stating a self-evident truth.

‘I have met other xenos. They did not feel the urge to be so cruel. At least not so consistently.’

‘The eldar are known for their decadence. Some factions more than others.’

‘It would appear we have met one of the crueller ones,’ said Macharius.

‘How would we know? We have so little to compare them to.’

Macharius shrugged. I looked at Drake. I realised I was seeing an unusual thing; the inquisitor was uneasy. It was not like him to admit ignorance on any subject.

We came at last to an odd, arched structure in the wall. It looked as if it were a gate or a doorway but made of solid stone. Drake took out some sort of portable divinatory engine and turned it on. He studied the results and said, ‘It’s solid. There is nothing behind this. This gate leads nowhere.’

‘Why put it here then?’ Macharius asked. ‘It is strange to have a representation of such a thing at this spot. You would expect a tunnel, something leading deeper into the earth, another chamber. Why place a gate here?’

Drake looked at his scanner, then at the gate and said, ‘I don’t know, but energies roil at this spot, and I sense something dark and strange beyond it.’

Macharius raised an eyebrow. ‘I thought you said there was nothing behind it, merely solid stone. Is there something buried there?’

Drake looked baffled. ‘It is solid. If we blasted the stonework away we would find nothing, and yet I sense…’ His voice trailed off into silence and he said, ‘It would not be a good idea to try and destroy the stonework here.

It is permeated with psychic energies, and they are getting stronger.’

‘Has it any connection to the eldar presence?’

‘I strongly suspect some things,’ the inquisitor said.

‘What are they?’

‘I think this place was laid out according to some alien geomantic principle. It was intended to channel energies and achieve some goal.’

‘You could not be a little more specific?’

‘I am not any sort of psychic engineer. The ancient eldar were supposed to be, though. A lot of their so-called civilisation was built on such principles. I think this whole valley is an engine of some sort, and whatever is in it is coming awake.’

‘It would seem best to assume that whatever is happening here is not intended for our benefit.’

‘That would be wise,’ said Drake.

Macharius turned to the men guarding the gateway arch. ‘Remain here, and if anything unusual occurs report it at once.’

‘At once, sir,’ said the soldiers. We turned and made our way back to the surface.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY

I have the reports from my commanders on the surface. It seems that everything is in place and that the warship in orbit has been drawn out of position to engage my fleet. The signal from the gate tells me that the opening must occur soon. It is almost time to give the order to attack.

And yet something stops me. I am not even sure what it is. Perhaps I simply want to savour the moment, to bask in those last few heartbeats before my plan of attack is implemented and that which was merely a possibility in my mind becomes wedded to reality. Perhaps I am afraid that it will all go wrong as so much has gone wrong during the course of this conflict. I have developed considerable respect for the human commander, which feels like an obscenity when I contemplate it but nonetheless is true. I would not have thought it possible that one of those hairless apes could have caused me so much trouble.

I give myself a few seconds, and then I speak the words that will send my forces into the attack and trap the humans in the Valley of the Ancients forever.

One by one my commanders report back. The assault has begun.

After we returned to the surface, Macharius dismissed us. As the afternoon sun rose over the mountains, Anton, Ivan and I hiked to the northern edge of the valley, directly beneath the great stone face.

Looking up at it from this angle it lost any of its resemblance to humanity,

stopped being a face and was just a jumble of lines and stone protrusions. It was like the other cliffs surrounding us, the intelligence that had shaped it in no way evident.

All around us were a mass of boulders, some the size of a pillow, some the size of an armoured vehicle. There was lots of jagged scree. Green moss marked everything. Twin gulleys ran away from the bottom of the rock face. It was set on a separate peak that protruded into the north of the valley like the prow of a great stone ship.

The air was chill and clear, and our breath came out in clouds, like the exhausts of the vehicles in cold climates.

I studied the rocks. There was no sign that a large force of xenos had passed this way last night. There was no sign of tracks or wheeled vehicles. It was as though all the eldar vehicles moved without making contact with the ground. They must have been fiercely manoeuvrable as well. The rocks provided quite an obstacle course for any craft trying to move through them.

I looked up the gulleys and saw green-tunicked Lion Guards at work, laying mines, setting up wire and booby traps and gun emplacements among the rocks. If the eldar came back, they would be noticed and slowed by them. I took a seat on one of the smaller boulders, broke out a ration pack and began to eat. The others did likewise.

Anton let out a long, satisfied sigh. ‘I love work,’ he said. ‘I could watch people doing it all day.’

Anton munched some jerky and looked at the hills through the scope of his sniper rifle. Ivan propped himself up, back against a large boulder so that he had cover, and took out a small toolset. With a hooked implement he began to work at the hinge of his jaw. It was a disturbing sight. It’s a strange world when you can get used to looking at torn apart bodies but the sight of a friend repairing his augmetics is off-putting when you eat.

I pulled out a set of magnoculars and looked down the valley. The end of the valley under the face was somewhat higher than the central part, and I had a good view of the temple complexes, the surrounding cliffs and statues. I wondered how many of the bloody things there were.

I watched the green-tunicked Lion Guard set the perimeter. Elite bodyguard or no, their officers set them to digging trenches and setting up earthworks. Our most powerful vehicles were dug in as strongpoints at

critical areas for the defence. Our tanks were laid out like a wall, anchored on the main temple complex. Some of our artillery had been brought in from the eastern heights and set up within our lines. Macharius had given very specific instructions for the deployment. It seemed he had something on his mind.

'I don't like this at all,' said Ivan. He shaded his eyes. I could tell from the angle of his neck he was studying the heights to the north-west and the south. He pulled out the magnoculars he had taken from the heretic colonel on Jurasik well over a decade ago and studied the heights. I knew exactly what he meant.

'Too easy to catch us, the way we caught the eldar,' I said.

'Precisely,' said Ivan.

'To be fair,' said Anton, 'I think Macharius probably noticed that too. He does know a bit about generalship. Or are you suggesting that maybe we should start taking advice from the pair of you?'

'He could always call down an orbital bombardment to clear those ridges.' Ivan looked thoughtful as he let his magnoculars drop to dangle on the end of their cords. 'If there is still a ship up there.'

'Blight's boys got it right the first time,' I said. 'I am not sure I want to risk them managing a repeat performance.'

'I know what you mean,' said Ivan. 'Any mistake and they hit the valley and us along with it.'

We shared the ground soldiers' mistrust of those who fought their wars from high orbit.

In the camp, Lion Guards with spades and entrenching tools flattened earth that had been cleared by vehicles with bulldozer attachments. They were raising ramparts between the temple complexes, creating an improvised fortress out of rubble and dirt and barbed wire. I was not sure how much it would slow creatures as agile as the eldar had proven to be, but it was better than nothing.

Some of the Leman Russ crews were sunning themselves on the side of their battle tanks. Others were making field repairs with the sort of loving care I could remember Corporal Hesse lavishing on *Old Number Ten*, the Baneblade on which we had started our careers.

More vehicles were flattening an area around the plinth atop which huge eldar deities cavorted. An officer looked up into the sky and studied an

opening in the clouds as if he expected to see a supply shuttle coming in right away.

‘Supply drops from orbit,’ said Ivan sourly. ‘What could possibly go wrong there.’ He glanced at the ridge lines to the north-west and south again. He was thinking about how difficult it would be to bring shuttles down in the teeth of fire from the surrounding hills if the eldar could take command of those heights. If there were still a ship up there to make the drops.

‘By the Emperor,’ Anton said, ‘you two are in a sour mood. We’ve already driven those torturing eldar bastards out of this place. We’ve got tanks. We’ve got Macharius. We’ve got a company of Space Wolves. What more do you want – a couple of Chapters of Space Marines?’

‘I would not say no,’ I said. ‘I don’t like this place. I don’t like those statues. I don’t like the fact we’ve got a few of the xenos buried beneath those temples. I would bet a bullet to a battle tank that some of them are sharpening their flaying knives in preparation for an evening’s entertainment.’

‘If they show their ugly faces we’ll blow them away,’ said Anton. His voice was gruff but his expression was worried. I could tell he was thinking about what might happen if the eldar below us emerged in the night. The ruined temples were surrounded by men and vehicles and barbed wire, but we knew how fast and agile the xenos were and they spooked us.

Our covering batteries on the eastern heights opened fire. There was the distinctive roar of Basilisks. All motion in the valley seemed to stop for a moment. It was as if every single eye were suddenly turned in the direction the guns were aiming at. The observers had obviously spotted something. I glanced up the gulley. Our sentries were alert but there was no sign of any enemy coming down on us.

‘I don’t like the look of this at all,’ Ivan said. He gestured upslope. Xenos landships were starting to appear on the ridges to the north-west of the valley. Wind billowed in their sails, their wings flexed like those of living things.

‘Looks like the eldar are back,’ said Anton.

‘Looks like they brought a few friends,’ I said. It was true, too. Hundreds of landships were there and other things, hovering monstrous scuttling things, large as tanks with long, lashing limbs that reminded me of tentacles

mixed with the pincers of scorpions. Their vehicles were silent. Their weapons opened up in counter-battery fire. Suddenly a flight of their attack craft soared overhead to engage with our batteries on the eastern heights. They spiralled in like great evil bats and their weapons tore into our guns, silencing them. More eldar vehicles appeared on the ridgeline amid the twisted wreckage of the artillery.

'We'd better get back,' I said. I was uneasy. The eldar had simply reversed positions with Macharius. We were trapped in the valley and they surrounded us.

We had just risen when I heard the sounds of weapons opening up nearby. Down in the gulley, a wave of eldar were moving. Xenos flickered between the rocks, closing with a speed that was inhuman, overrunning the outlying positions. The mines did not stop them. Only a few activated. Duds, perhaps, I thought, or maybe something about our opponents prevented them from detonating. It was not my job to figure this out. I lengthened my stride and clutched my shotgun close.

'I think it's time we reported for duty with Macharius,' said Anton. Agonised screams drifted on the wind, mingled with mad, mocking laughter.

'Pull back,' shouted the Guard officer.

Looking at the monstrous thing scuttling in our direction I felt very inclined to run. It was enormous, and there was something alive about it. Something so huge had to be a vehicle of sorts, but this one had the strange, semi-living look of a great deal of the eldar technology we had seen.

Just in case we had any doubts we had been spotted, shots started to ping off the rocks around us. At least the Lion Guard were in good cover, which probably saved a few lives.

'First squad, cover us. The rest fall back. By unit and in good order.' The officer was using his parade ground voice now. It was pointless using anything else. I saw heads turn as the members of the first squad looked back in our direction. Their commander had just pronounced their death sentence and they knew it.

In their heads they were doing the same calculations I would be making in their position. They were working out the odds of getting back to the camp if they turned and fled now. The fact that they would be shot for deserting their posts and disobeying an order would only be a small part of the

reckoning. When death taps you on the shoulder even a few more minutes of life suddenly becomes very appealing.

Against the urge for self-preservation other things warred. Working against that impulse to flee were other ones, some of them coldly rational, some of them steeped in primal emotions. There was the knowledge that if they turned and fled all of us would most likely die anyway as the enemy swept over us from behind. If they stayed they would have a chance to take some of the foe with them, and their lives might at least buy the lives of their comrades. It's hard to communicate the sort of loyalty that gets built up towards your fellows in an Imperial Guard company, but it exists nonetheless. You see men lay down their lives for each other more often than you would think and more often than a cynic would believe.

And they were proud too, of themselves and of their unit. They would stand their ground and die because they were the sort of men who could, or at least they wanted to be. They were brave, they believed in Macharius and they believed in the Emperor. They could die as cowards or walk into His Light as martyrs. One had meaning. One had not. In either case they would die.

I could see all of this pass through their minds in less time than it takes to tell. I read it in the way slumped shoulders squared and lasguns were suddenly raised to the firing position. One or two of them saluted. The one or two who wavered, seeing their companions' resolve to stay, gave bitter smiles and hunkered down to sell their own lives dearly.

It's at moments like this that the quality of a single man can make a difference. All it takes is one soldier deciding to flee to provoke a rout. One soldier determined to hold his ground can keep an army pinned in place if he is the right soldier at the right time. These men were the right men. It made me proud and sad at the same time, even as I turned to move off down the hill with Anton and Ivan. Behind me lasguns fired.

The slope was dark and strewn with obstacles. Ahead of us I could see the walls of our camp. I think every man present had the same idea in his mind that I had, the sensation that doom was swiftly approaching in a particularly nasty and messy form.

Behind us, the covering force were selling their lives dearly and doing their best to avoid being taken prisoner. They saved us. In the teeth of their covering fire, the eldar could not be sure of exactly how large a force they

faced so they held back until the monster arrived.

Casting a glance over my shoulder, prompted by some ancient instinct, I saw a scuttling form loom, a gigantic arachnid figure with clicking claws. It reminded me of a Titan, although it was smaller and there was an obscene suggestion of something living and evil about it. There were men in the grip of those claws, screaming and shouting and still firing their lasguns. Looking at the gigantic beast and one of those tiny-looking figures, I swear I caught sight of something horrible.

The man seemed to be shrinking, dwindling, like a deflating balloon filled with blood. I don't mean that the blood was being squeezed out of him, either. I had an image in mind of hundreds of tiny sucker mouths, leech-like, draining all life from him, all vitality. The man's screams became thinner, more wretched, more filled with pain; and then the strangest thing of all happened. His flesh just crumbled, as if all life, all fluid, all animation had been drained out of it. It turned to dust, like an ancient corpse suddenly exposed to light and air when its sarcophagus is opened. I was filled with an ominous sense that not just the man's body had been devoured, but his soul.

A barrage of shots hit the great monster, exploding against its side, blasting great holes out of it. The beast thrashed as though it were in pain, but it did not drop the soldiers it held. It gripped them like a drunk holding his last bottle even as the Baneblade and Leman Russ within our camp sent blast after blast stabbing into its body. More of the monsters appeared now and began to lumber down the slope. They were followed by shark-fin sailed landships loaded with eldar.

We moved as fast as we could downslope away from the great stone face carved in the cliffs back towards the lines of our main camp. The eldar on the north-west heights aimed desultory fire at us. It was as if they were not really trying, or simply wanted to terrify us rather than kill us. It suited their crazed humour.

I had a strange crawling sensation between my shoulders. It would only take one of those cruel xenos to suddenly change its mind and my life would be over. If you've been on as many battlefields as I have, you have a fine appreciation for the sort of mischances that can end a man's days.

I noticed the turrets of our sentry vehicles were elevating their weapons to concentrate on the heights behind us.

My knees felt sore as we pounded downslope. I kept my head down and studied the broken ground with care, knowing that tripping up now might be the death of me. I did my best to weave through the low boulders and shards of broken rock, as they would provide at least some cover to the lower half of my body. Driven by a sudden premonition, I threw myself flat behind a rock and risked a look back upslope. I saw the ground crowded with silent, swift-striding eldar soldiers and their equally quietly moving vehicles. Shots were going off all around. They were moving much faster than we were, and I knew that they would soon overtake us. That was the last thing I wanted.

The rocks made a kind of cave. They had tumbled together so that a slab of stone formed a roof over some more. I wriggled in underneath out of sight. I heard heavy breathing and noticed that Ivan and Anton had slipped into place beside me. They had come back for me. It was kind of touching.

‘Planning on making a heroic last stand in these rocks?’ Ivan asked. ‘Just you and the hordes of eldar…’

Anton said, ‘Bastard! I thought maybe you had twisted your ankle or something and needed to be carried as usual. There doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with you. You’re just getting lazy.’

‘I thought I would cover your retreat,’ I said. ‘You were making very good time as you ran away.’

‘Get your head down and have some kip while we did all the fighting more like,’ Anton said. He was studying the eldar along the ridgeline carefully. Any moment now he was going to unlimber the sniper rifle and start taking potshots. ‘As usual.’

‘What are you thinking?’ Ivan asked. His metal face was impassive, but he knew how desperate our situation was. We were stuck here in this little island of rocks while all around us the eldar moved forward to assault our position. Our force at the gulley mouth beneath the face had already been overrun, and there was no way just the three of us could fight our way back through the xenos.

‘I’m thinking we’re stuck here with those xenos bastards commanding the heights above us. It’s not like Macharius to make a mistake like this.’

‘What else could he do? He wanted to hold these temples. We don’t have the force for defence in depth.’

‘Who would have thought there would be so many of those eldar?’ said

Anton. He was looking through the scope of the rifle now. I reached out and grabbed his ankle and pulled him back down. The last thing we needed now was the glint of his scope giving us away to some watching eldar. For all we knew some of them on the heights might have noticed us and be reporting our position to their comrades even now. It was not a reassuring thought. Anton dropped back into cover.

‘There’s more of them than I count,’ he said.

‘So more than five then,’ said Ivan.

‘Ha-bloody-ha!’

‘He can get to twenty if he uses his toes,’ I said.

‘If he takes his boots off,’ said Ivan.

‘When you two have finished your sad attempt at comedy you might want to consider how we’re going to get back down the hill without getting shot.’

‘They weren’t trying to hit us, Anton,’ I said. ‘If they had been we’d be dead now.’

‘Then why–’

Another long scream drifted down the wind. It sounded like a soul in torment. It rang ever higher until it broke on a horrible insane gibbering note, as if the mind of the man screaming had been broken by whatever torture he was enduring.

Anton shot me a scared look.

‘I think they wanted to take us alive,’ I said. ‘Though we might not stay that way for long afterwards.’

‘Any time might be too long,’ said Ivan.

‘What are we going to do?’ Ivan asked. As usual, when the chips were down, the other two were looking to me for guidance. I turned our options over and over in my mind. We could not stay here. We had very little water in our canteens, and sooner or later we were bound to be spotted by one of the eldar. If they had not already spotted us and were just letting the suspense build before they took us…

‘We wait until it’s dark and then we try and sneak through their lines,’ I said.

‘You mad?’ Anton asked.

‘You got a better idea? If we stay here, it’s only a matter of time before they find us.’

‘Our own sentries will shoot us,’ Ivan said.

‘We’ll just need to risk it. It would be better than falling into the hands of those xenos scum.’

‘No arguments from me there,’ said Ivan. More screams sounded, echoing down the valley. They appeared to be amplified. Maybe the eldar were broadcasting them to break the morale of our men. Maybe it was just something they did for relaxation.

Anton looked me right in the eye. His face was pale. ‘If it looks like they are going to take me alive, shoot me…’

‘It will be my pleasure,’ I said, but the joke did not seem so funny any more.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A tall shadow fell onto the rocks where we crouched, telling us that one of the alien warriors was standing there. It seemed like all he would need to do was turn his head and see us. I kept the shotgun clutched very tight in my hands, not sure whether I would use it on him or myself. I felt Anton and Ivan tense beside me.

I glanced sideways. Sweat dripped from Anton's pale, narrow face. The scar was visible on his forehead. I felt my muscles coil. Part of me suspected that the xenos might be able to hear the drops of perspiration falling on the rock. After what felt like an aeon, the eldar finally moved off. Even as it did so I wondered if it had seen us and was now toying with us as a felid toys with a nest of vermin.

As the day wore on, the butcher shop stench of the battlefield drifted to my nostrils. I wondered whether eldar corpses smelt like ours when they died. I wondered whether anybody back in our camp had noticed we were not there. I wondered about Anna and about a thousand other things I could do nothing about but which all were suddenly very important to me.

Darkness came very slowly. My stomach felt as though it were full of acid. My heart pounded against my ribs. My mouth was dry. I wanted to empty my bladder but found I could not. All around us, I could hear the strange sounds of the eldar army moving. I noticed the eerie whine of their vehicles moving less than ten strides away. I felt currents of air displaced by the motion swirl of their sails. Sometimes I caught the scent of cinnamon and

some sour-sweet perfume, sometimes what smelt like incense, sometimes something that smelt like an accident in an abattoir.

Eventually, the stars glittered coldly overhead like the eyes of watching daemons. The sounds of combat continued in the distance. I decided it was time to risk a glance out.

I looked down into a sea of shadows on the reverse side of the slope. The eldar were still there. I could see their strange landships and something else, something massive and vaguely scorpion-like. I knew it was another of those monstrous life-drinking beasts. I spotted movement as dim, humanoid outlines moved with inhuman speed, their elongated forms suggesting shadows and daemons and things from fever-induced nightmares. Nearby were a few metal poles with crossbars. Flayed forms hung from them. The stench of blood and raw meat and opened bowels hung in the air, the scent of an operating theatre where the patients were sent to be painfully killed rather than to be healed.

I studied the concentration of forces. There were scores of vehicles and thousands of eldar, and those monstrous things with claws, whatever they were.

Something flickered at the corner of my eye and I realised there were other xenos, far closer to us than those in the camp, scouts or pickets. It was pure chance that they had not picked our hiding spot as their own sentry post.

I froze on the spot, hoping that I would not be noticed. A warm form popped up beside me, and I looked around to see Anton. He was scanning the area beneath us through the scope of his sniper rifle. It had a night-sight attachment. Crouched beside him was Ivan. I could catch the faint glimmer of moonlight even on the dirt-smeared metal of his cheeks.

A long straggling line of Lion Guard stretched along the perimeter wall below us. Here and there weapons emplacements bulged. At various gaps in the walls, armoured fighting vehicles were used as makeshift gates.

We had only a few hundred metres to go to reach our camp. Looking at that force it might as well have been a thousand leagues. The ground between the two forces was a killing field.

I dropped down again and the other two fell into position beside me. I kept my ears pricked up, waiting to hear the telltale sound of a weapon barrel against rock or stone slithering against stone. All I heard was my own soft breathing. It was almost drowned out by my drum-beat heart.

‘You still want to try for our lines?’ Ivan asked. His voice was as flat and emotionless as ever.

‘You got a better idea? We’ve been lucky so far. I wouldn’t count on that luck holding a second day.’

Anton let out a long sigh. ‘We’d better get it over with then.’

‘We climb down out of here and we circle left,’ I said. ‘It looks like there’s a gap in the eldar line in the direction of the eastern heights. We’ll head for the gate made by the Baneblade.’ I liked the sound of that. Call it superstition but Baneblades always gave me a feeling of security, even after I had one destroyed underneath me.

Ivan shrugged. One direction seemed as good as another to him. Anton nodded. ‘I could use a lho-stick,’ he said. It had the sound of a man making a last request.

‘Yeah, go on,’ I said. ‘Maybe you’d like to smoke it as we sneak along.’

‘I’m not that stupid,’ said Anton.

‘We could try a few marching songs as well,’ Ivan suggested helpfully. ‘*Gone for a Soldier* or *The Cadian Boot Song*. A few rousing choruses would certainly raise my morale.’

‘Maybe you’d like to set off a flare,’ I said. ‘We could see better that way.’

‘A torch is what we really need,’ said Ivan.

‘I just said I would like a smoke. There’s no need to make a meal out of it.’

We fell silent. We had just been spinning it out to put off making a start.

Suddenly the sound of shooting came from off to the east. Explosions as well. The turrets along the wall had opened up, blasting at the ridge below us.

‘Looks like our lads are trying a counter-strike,’ Ivan said.

‘Good news for us,’ I said. ‘A bit of a distraction. Emperor watch over you!’

With that I sent myself diving out of cover before I had a chance to think and regret my action. I slithered down the rocks, half crawling, half scrambling, praying to the Emperor that the sounds of that distant attack had gotten the eldar’s attention. As soon as I was off the rocky island, I threw myself flat on my belly and wriggled down a narrow gulley.

Off to my right, not twenty strides away, were a group of xenos. They had their backs to me, but for all I knew that meant nothing. They might have sensors on those battle-suits capable of three hundred and sixty degree

scanning. Hell, maybe they had senses we did not know about that would let them spot us without ever seeming to look in our direction. Who knew what the alien bastards were capable of?

I forced myself to lie flat for a minute, and I felt something touch my boot. I fought down the urge to kick out, turned and saw Anton lying there. Behind him was Ivan. They had both smeared more dirt on their faces to make them less visible. I listened. The sounds of distant fighting intensified. Heavy artillery tore up the earth. I found something else to worry about. What if they suddenly decided to target the area we were moving across? I could feel the ground vibrate against my cheek.

I wriggled on, trusting the others to follow me. Maybe it was a dried up stream bed. Maybe it was something else, but the gulley we were in ran a long way downhill. I decided to trust my luck and stick with it.

Another hundred strides of wriggling took us under the shadow of one of those gigantic scuttling war machines. The cinnamon smell was stronger and there was a dreamy sort of perfume with a sour under-tang of blood. A massive tail lashed the air, making a lazy whip-crack sound. A long, low, musical tone cut through the sound of gunfire, and I thought for one brief, heart-stopping instant that we had been spotted and an alarm had been given. Of course, it was mere paranoia. The machine, if that is what it was, turned and began to scuttle off in the direction of the fighting.

Flashes of light made shadows dance madly all around us, the muzzle flicker and explosive glare of all those thousands of weapons being used in the cold night air. I froze for a moment, convinced this time that I was visible to every alien eye on the battlefield. The idea that they might have been looking for targets elsewhere never even occurred to me.

I felt something cool beneath my hand as I shifted my weight to a new position. Looking down I saw something smooth and stone-like, too rounded to be completely natural, with a texture a little like bone. It was not as cold as the surrounding rock. When I lifted it and held it closer to my eye, I saw that it had a similar look to the battle-armour the xenos were wearing. It was clearly some sort of device and I had a sudden crazy idea of exactly what sort.

Carefully I raised it and tossed it down the hill, already strongly suspecting it was too late.

‘What the…’ Anton said.

‘Proximity sensor,’ I said. ‘I’m guessing.’

‘We’ve been spotted?’

‘Seems best to assume that.’

Another huge burst of artillery fire lit the night overhead. I glanced over my shoulder. Some of the shadows back there suddenly looked a lot more humanoid. They moved, and not in answer to any flickering of moonbeams through the clouds. There was a whole company of the enemy down there, closing silently. The time for stealth was obviously past.

I rose and moved forward in a crouching run, zigzagging to make myself a harder target, moving through the boulders towards the rampart wall. As I did so another danger became more obvious. It would be just as easy to be killed by our own side. I began to shout, ‘For Macharius and the Emperor!’ I held my shotgun over my head in the classic pose of surrender. I shouted the day’s password, and then it occurred to me that the eldar could easily have tortured that out of any captive.

A flash of our earlier idiotic conversation came to me. I began to bellow out the words of *Gone for a Soldier*, the ancient marching song used by Guard regiments for millennia. A searchlight probed us. Some las-bolts turned surrounding rocks cherry-red. I heard Anton and Ivan singing behind me. The las-fire surrounding us moved on behind us, stabbing through the night towards the pursuing eldar.

Heartbeats later, breath wheezing from my lips I found myself looking up at the frontal armour of a Baneblade that was being used as a gate in the rampart wall. An officer’s head leaned over and shouted, ‘What the hell are you doing down there?’

‘Sergeant Lemuel,’ I said. Knowing I would only have one chance to sway him, I added, ‘Personal bodyguard to the Lord High Commander.’

‘I know your face,’ he said. ‘I’ve seen you with Lord Macharius.’

‘Then let us up! In the name of the Emperor.’

‘What are you doing down there?’

‘Can we discuss that once we’re inside the perimeter?’ I said.

A rope was dropped and I pulled myself up. Anton and Ivan followed. I don’t think I have ever been so relieved to put a barrier between myself and pursuit.

We were held under the guns of the sentries. I don’t know whether the Lion

Guard thought we were spies or suspected some strange xenos trick, but it seemed like hauling us up was the full extent of their willingness to trust us. A messenger was sent to find out what to do with us. I looked out over the wall and thought about the hordes of eldar out there. I cursed and kept very still, determined that I had not escaped their flensing knives only to be shot by some nervous, trigger-happy Guardsman.

Fifteen minutes later, the Undertaker showed up. He took one look at us and said, ‘That’s them. I’m responsible for taking them to Inquisitor Drake.’

Delivered as it was in his flat-monotone, that sounded just about as menacing as a massed charge by the xenos. Drake was a man who knew a few tricks of torture himself. I wondered if he was going to practise some of them on us.

‘Take us to him,’ I heard Anton say. His voice was full of false bravado.

‘Your capacity to find trouble never ceases to amaze me,’ Drake said. As he spoke his glowing hand passed over my brow. We had already been physically examined and pronounced clean. Now he was using his own peculiar powers.

‘We did not go looking for it,’ I said. ‘We just wanted to take a look at the Face.’

‘And yet somehow trouble found you,’ Drake said. His voice was cold and clear, as always. If he were bothered by me talking back to him he gave no sign of it. Apparently it was a privilege I had earned over the past ten years. ‘You go for a walk, you spend an evening behind enemy lines and then you casually wander back into camp. I can see why Macharius thinks you are lucky.’

‘There was nothing casual about it, I can assure you,’ I said.

‘And now as we are being assaulted I have to waste my time examining you because of the value the Lord High Commander places on your continued existence.’

Drake had a gift for talking about you as if you were not there, or some sort of specimen he was examining. I suppose that level of detachment was an advantage in his vocation. He gave a cold smile, shrugged and said, ‘I believe you can return to active service with Macharius. I will accompany you. I have matters to discuss with the Lord High Commander.’

The eldar attacks had stopped for the moment. Outside it was quiet except

for the occasional scream of the eldar's captives.

We wait in the darkness beneath. The humans know we are here. The fear of us will paralyse them. They know that within their lines of defence a ruthless enemy waits. They are assailed on many sides, from the heights above the valley, from the access points and from below, from within the fortifications they thought would protect them.

I have given the order that teams of warriors are to emerge when the opportunity arises; they are to take prisoners and devour them, and leave the corpses where they can be found by our foes. Humans are weak. They will know fear. They will give in to it.

I have selected a new chamber to act as my headquarters in the labyrinth. It is positioned with easy access to the routes that lead to the gate so that when the time comes I can easily make my way to my ultimate goal.

I have deployed rings of warriors in a defensive perimeter to make sure that none of the Space Marines hunting us can reach me. These are the very best of my soldiers. Each is individually a match for a Space Wolf.

I study my surroundings. They reveal the obsession of my distant forebears with complex carvings. Thousands of masks have been embossed on the wall; each one of them shows the expression on the face of a forgotten god. It is difficult to tell whether they represent the thousand moods of a dozen gods or the dozen moods of a thousand feeble deities. All I can see are faces that show simpering joy, witless grief, dubious happiness and on and on. I block out the distraction.

Outside my chamber I hear a faint sound, slightly worrying, like a body falling. I draw my weapon just in case. It is not possible that an enemy could have reached me here, but perhaps there is a traitor within the ranks of my own guards. It would not be the first time such a thing has happened to an eldar commander.

I look outside and I see a fallen body indeed. The head is twisted at an odd angle that tells me the neck has been broken. I look around for Bael and see that he is not there. He should be. He was in charge of this detachment.

I step outside, ready to strike in any direction. The corridor is empty, although in the distance at either end I can see a guard. I raise my hand and each of them responds in turn.

I walk over to one and ask if he has seen Bael. He says no. It is the same at

the other end of the corridor. It is not possible for Bael to have vanished without them seeing him, or is it?

I walk back along the corridor, this time keeping my eyes on the ceiling, and I notice at one point that there is an opening there, some sort of ventilation system. I spring up and inspect it, and I see that it has been recently removed.

Someone has been here. Someone has entered the very heart of our position without being noticed and managed to kidnap one of my own officers without the sentries seeing it. I realise it can only be one of the Space Wolves that has done this.

I call the sentries and tell them to keep watch. I tell them to be particularly careful in checking the ceilings for ventilation access hatches. I move my command position again, thinking about how worryingly close I came to being captured myself. It seems that these vermin are more dangerous than I had thought.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The door swung open and Grimnar walked into Macharius's command bunker. He was casually dragging what I assumed was an eldar corpse by the neck. Then I realised it was more than that.

'I have a prisoner for you to interrogate,' he said, looking at Drake. My eyes widened. He had not only come back alive from a labyrinth haunted by xenos, he had brought one of them with him.

'Very good,' said Macharius. The xenos lay limply, but I remembered the other one that had been faking back on the spacecraft. I held my shotgun ready, feeling as jumpy as a felid that had lapped up Frenzon in its milk. Anton and Ivan looked just as nervous. The Undertaker looked blankly on.

I took another look at the eldar. Its armour was rent in various places and spattered with dark stuff that could only be blood. It had been stripped of all obvious weapons, but still I could not help but think it was dangerous. A creature so swift and deadly could never be considered harmless.

Drake licked his lips. A cold smile flickered across his face. There was something else there as well, an expression I can only describe as nervous as well as cruel.

Good, I thought, remembering what the eldar had done to our soldiers. Let's see how they endure suffering. Drake was an inquisitor, trained to get answers in all sorts of ways, some of them very nasty. Normally I would have done a lot to avoid seeing him at work but, like I said, the eldar brought out the worst in us. A small daemon of violence and cruelty sat on

my shoulder and whispered that anything done to this creature was justified. I felt obscurely ashamed. I would have liked to think better of myself.

'Take it to my sanctum,' Drake said. 'I want it stripped, scanned and chained down.'

'I want to be there,' said Macharius. 'I have some questions myself.'

He gestured for us to follow. Drake shrugged. With no effort whatsoever, Grimnar dragged the armoured xenos along the floor. Its slithering made an odd sound on the stone, as if a jewelled serpent were scraping against a rock.

Drake had converted a small antechamber into something that was halfway between a study and an alchemical lab. Divinatory engines sat on either side of a long table. Chains of the sort normally used for manacling deserters were brought. Grimnar tore off the xenos's armour and removed its helmet. He was not gentle about the way he broke the seals.

The eldar lay on the table. Its face was oddly sensitive and beautiful. With its eyes closed it was as serene as one of the statues of the gods out there in the valley. The connection between the creatures we fought and the original temple builders was obvious. The prisoner had the same lobeless, pointed ears and the same almond-shaped eyes. Its cheekbones were high. Its lips were thin.

Drake opened a padded case full of vials and syringes. He considered them for a while then shook his head, dismissing them. Possibly he doubted the effects of truth serums intended for humans on the alien form before him. Perhaps he feared they might prove fatal before he could get his answers. He shut his case again and looked at Grimnar, then Macharius, then us.

'Be ready for anything,' he said. The Space Wolf nodded.

'Is there danger to you?' Macharius asked.

'There is always some possibility of spiritual contamination when dealing with xenos,' said Drake. 'But I am an inquisitor. I can cope.'

I wondered if he was as confident as he sounded. He rolled up his sleeves, laved his hands in water and strode forward, placing his fingers on the temples of the eldar. For a long moment, nothing happened, then I noticed a faint nimbus of light playing around each of Drake's fingertips. The chamber seemed to grow colder, and I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck begin to rise.

Suddenly, the eldar sat upright, moving easily against the weight of its chains. I brought the shotgun up, and Anton and Ivan placed themselves between the xenos and Macharius. The eldar's eyes were open now and it had lost all the serenity that being unconscious had given its appearance. Its eyes were lilac and commanding. Its expression was shockingly evil. Just looking at its countenance made me want to back away.

Drake's hands remained in contact with the xenos's head. It stared into the middle distance, a grimace of frustration twisted its features. The expression was mirrored on Drake's face. Some sort of spiritual struggle was clearly under way.

For a moment I wondered whether the inquisitor had bitten off more than he could chew. Perhaps the mind of the eldar was too powerful and too wicked for him. Perhaps rather than Drake being the dominant partner, he would end up being corrupted or having his mind broken. As the thought occurred to me I turned my head slightly, and as if by accident brought the shotgun to bear on him. No one else seemed to notice, save perhaps Grimnar. They were too caught up in the unfolding drama.

'What is your name?' Drake asked. His voice was as harsh as stone grinding on stone, and it sounded as though he were simply vocalising the last of a series of statements that had already flickered between his mind and that of the eldar.

The eldar made an effort to resist him. Muscles spasmed, tendons became visible in its neck. Its face twitched. Its eyes went wide. It was trying to clamp its lips shut, to bite down on its tongue, to stop itself breathing.

'What is your name?' Drake repeated. His patient tone was at odds with the strain written on his own face. 'You will tell me, you know. It is only a matter of time.'

The eldar's whole body flexed, but it was held down by the chains.

'What is your name? I can keep repeating this all day, and it will only get worse for you.'

Something seemed to break within the eldar. 'Bael.'

'Bael. Good,' Drake said softly. He had won his first and most important victory, although he gave no sign of knowing it.

'You will answer my questions, Bael,' said Drake.

'It matters not,' said the eldar. It was a voice without the slightest trace of humanity in it. Bael's lips were moving and liquid musical sounds were

coming out; a moment later crystalline sounds, more mechanical than musical, spoke the words in Imperial Gothic. It was like listening to a machine speak to the accompaniment of distant, lovely, alien singing.

I realised the singing was the actual eldar speech, the words the product of a translation engine. There was little emotion in the eldar's voice, but his face was twisted with hatred. Clearly the xenos was not enjoying experiencing Drake's psychic powers. 'You are doomed anyway, mon-keigh.'

Drake forced his lips into a cold smile. Beads of sweat appeared on his pale forehead. The experience appeared no more pleasant for him than it did for the eldar, and it appeared to cost considerably more effort. 'Why is that, deviant?'

'Because you face the Archon Ashterioth and his legions. You will die slowly, in great pain, to feed him and his warriors.'

Macharius and Drake exchanged a look.

'Feed?' Macharius said. His voice was glacially calm.

'Answer him,' said Drake. There was a hint of the lash in his voice. The eldar's features twisted in a rictus of pain.

'We feast on the agony of lesser species,' said the eldar. 'Your pain is our sustenance.'

His beautiful, inhuman features showed nothing but contempt, but I was starting to think I detected a hint of horror in his eyes. If his kind fed on pain, what must it be like for him to endure the agony of questioning at the hands of Drake? He must feel as if he were being eaten alive by an animal. I pushed the thought to one side. I did not understand his thought processes and I did not want to.

'That certainly explains what you have been doing to our prisoners,' said Drake.

'They are not prisoners. They are not even slaves. They are cattle.' A chill of horror passed down my spine at the words. Bael really saw us this way. To him we were mere beasts, no more important than herd animals are to a farmer. It was worse than that, actually. No farmer would treat his herds the way these eldar treated humans.

'You will be treated in the same way when you are rounded up. Indeed, it will go worse for you because of this.'

Drake smiled coldly. 'You know that is not true. Your brethren will have

nothing but contempt for you for falling into our hands. I have reduced you to the status of a beast. You should remember that.'

Clearly Drake was picking more from the eldar's mind than the xenos was saying out loud. I knew he could lift memories and experiences directly from human minds when he brought his powers fully to bear. If he was doing that to Bael, I did not envy him. The alien's mind must be like a pit of snakes.

The eldar screamed, whether in agony or humiliation it was impossible to tell. 'You did not capture me. Your hound did.'

Grimnar laughed. His mirth had a clean, booming quality that it was good to hear amid the unwholesome monotones of the eldar's translation engine.

'We can argue about it all you like,' said Drake. 'But you are the one bound and treated like a beast.'

'I will make you die a thousand painful, agonising deaths. You will beg for the sweet release of oblivion a thousand times, and I will say no.'

'Yes, yes,' said Drake, an adult listening to the threats of a child. 'Of course, you will. In the meantime, you will answer all the questions put to you truthfully and to the best of your ability, otherwise you will not live to carry out your threats.'

'I do not fear death,' Bael said.

'No. You would welcome it now. Still, you will find it difficult to carry out threats with your limbs removed.'

It was the eldar's turn to laugh, at least I assumed that was what the mad, random sound the translation engine emitted was. 'Limbs can be regrown. Bodies can be rebuilt.'

A frown flickered across Drake's face. 'Yes. Of course, they can. Your haemonculi can do that.'

'You can pick the image from my mind, human, but you have no idea what the reality of it is.'

Drake concentrated. 'They could regrow you even from a simple cell, from the genetic helix if they could find it. Fascinating.'

Grimnar tilted his head to one side. 'Is that true?'

'This creature believes it is. More than that it believes, really believes, that the genetic sorcerers can restore its life and memories from as little as that.'

'Then they must be very different from humanity,' said Macharius. 'Such a thing is not possible, memories stored in the genetic helix.'

‘We are different, human,’ said Bael. ‘Different and infinitely superior.’

‘Infinitely more arrogant perhaps,’ said Macharius. ‘Or infinitely more deluded.’

‘You will die in agony, human. You will see who is deluded then.’

‘Why are you here?’ Macharius asked.

‘I am here because I follow Lord Ashterioth.’

‘And why is he here?’

‘He does not tell me his plans.’

‘No,’ Drake said, ‘But you eavesdrop on him. I can see it in your mind. You eavesdrop on his conversations with your listening devices. You decrypt his personal journals. You spy.’ He sounded interested. ‘And not just for yourself or by yourself. Your lover spies as well. Lady Sileria.’

‘It does not sound as if they trust each other very much,’ said Macharius.

‘The eldar are treacherous creatures,’ said Drake.

‘We put our own interests first. As you would, if you had intelligence above the apes you are descended from.’

‘Why is this Lord Ashterioth here?’ Macharius asked. He clearly wanted to know very badly. Bael clamped his lips shut. He did not want to speak. Once again tendons stood out on his neck. His muscles spasmed. This time he succeeded, or so it appeared for a few long moments.

‘He seeks something,’ said Drake.

‘Get out of my head, mon-keigh. Your presence pollutes me.’

‘Where is the Fist of Demetrius?’

‘The what?’ There was a mocking tone in the eldar’s voice despite his pain.

‘You know it. You see its image in your mind. I have put it there.’

‘Ashterioth has it. It fascinates him.’

‘Why?’ Macharius asked. Grimnar leaned forward, straining to hear. Given his senses, he did not need to. He was as keen as Macharius to learn the eldar’s purpose.

The eldar laughed. The sound was mechanical and insane, and there was something mocking in it.

‘What would they do with a relic of the primarch?’ Grimnar asked. ‘It can mean nothing to them.’

Drake frowned. Sweat ran down his forehead. Blood poured from his nose. The eldar made odd gurgling sounds. He was chewing on his tongue.

‘He tries to shield himself,’ Drake said. ‘He tries to escape into death.’

The nimbus of light around his head made his skin seem even more pale than usual. His lean face took on the aspect of a skull. The eldar screamed and went on screaming until his screams abruptly stopped.

‘It is dead,’ said Grimnar.

‘No matter,’ said Drake. ‘I have seen some of what he tried to hide.’

His voice sounded appalled.

‘What is it?’ Macharius asked.

‘They are not here for the Fist.’

‘It would not serve them. Its holy power would not aid the xenos. The Allfather would not allow it,’ said Grimnar.

‘They want the Fist because they think there will be samples of Russ’s tissue in it, part of his genetic rune structure, part of his helix.’

‘What good would that do them?’ Grimnar asked.

Macharius grasped it before any of us. ‘Because they believe they can rebuild a living being from a sample of its tissue.’

‘Recreate a primarch,’ Grimnar said. His voice held a note of wonder mingled with horror. He was obviously contemplating the possibility of the return of the founder of his Chapter. ‘That would be blasphemy. From the primarchs are all the Chapters descended, or so the skalds sing.’

‘It would be worse than blasphemy,’ said Drake. ‘They will sample his tissue and create abominations from it, add it to their own tissue, make monsters with semi-divine power.’

‘Why would they want to do that?’ I said. ‘They despise us.’

No one seemed inclined to take me to task for my outburst. Grimnar answered slowly and calmly.

‘The primarchs had more power than any living being, save for the Emperor himself. They believe that they will be able to recreate the secret of that power and be able to graft it to themselves.’

‘Is such a thing possible?’ Macharius asked.

‘I do not know, but the eldar believed it was, and he knew more about their alien techniques than any of us.’

‘The eldar with the power of a primarch, even a fraction, would be terrible foes,’ said Grimnar.

I thought that was a remarkable understatement. The idea of the cruellest race in the galaxy wielding the power of the most powerful beings who had

ever lived, beings powerful enough to awe a Space Marine, was an appalling one.

'We cannot allow that to happen,' said Macharius. 'The Fist must not be allowed to remain in their grasp.'

'Better to destroy it first,' said Grimnar in the voice of a man forced to contemplate the most heinous blasphemy.

'We must get rid of this body. Destroy it utterly,' said Drake. 'Bathe it in acid or burn it with lasguns until not the slightest trace remains.'

It sounded as if he feared the xenos's return as much as he feared the eldar's plan for the Fist. Given what he had done, and given the nature of the creatures, that was understandable.

'You said the eldar were not here for the Fist,' said Macharius. He was not one to allow himself to be distracted even by so horrible a prospect.

'No, they are here for the gate that exists beneath the temple complex. They are waiting for it to open.'

'Why?' Macharius asked.

'Beyond it lies some relic of their ancestors, a device of enormous power.'

'A weapon?'

'I fear so.'

'Can they really recreate a saint?' Anton asked. We were alone in our chamber now. Macharius had retired with Drake and Grimnar and his senior officers to plot. We had done our duty for the day.

'Drake seems to think so,' I said.

'Surely the Emperor would not allow it.'

'Who knows what the Emperor would allow. The galaxy is strange.'

'But surely Russ would never serve them,' Anton said.

'Perhaps they could change him during the process of rebuilding,' I said. 'You heard what the inquisitor said, who knows what they are capable of.'

'It is blasphemy, the Space Wolf is right,' said Ivan.

Anton looked excited. 'Who would ever have thought when we signed on with the Imperial Guard we would end up among the relics of the time when the Emperor walked among men.'

'Let's hope we don't end up as relics ourselves,' I said. The words were no sooner out of my mouth when alarms sounded. Drake and Macharius and the others emerged from the command room.

‘Ready yourself,’ Drake said. ‘The gate is opening.’

Another alarm sounded. ‘And the eldar are attacking,’ Macharius said. ‘They will be here soon.’

‘The timing is not a coincidence,’ Drake said.

I did not need him to tell me that.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I stood on the side of the Baneblade, leaning out from behind the turret, and studied the heights surrounding the valley. It had been a long night. The eldar mounted one attack after another: swift, subtle, constantly probing. There were feints within feints, swift strikes from one side of the valley followed by sudden retreats which coincided with advances from the other.

They never let up their attacks. A strike was always incoming from somewhere. It seemed to be their intention to never let us rest. It was a war of nerves, which they were well equipped to win because they enjoyed it, like cats playing with mice.

Sometimes they fled, or appeared to, and our troops followed them from our lines, only to have the eldar turn on them and cut them down. Other times they retreated slowly, inviting pursuit all the way to the surrounding hills. Macharius forbade it, of course, not wishing our forces to be drawn into a trap, but sometimes his orders were disobeyed in the excitement of the moment, or obeyed too late, and casualties ensued. And worse than casualties…

The sun rose above the mountains. The attacks had suddenly ceased, and we had just enough time to breathe a sigh of relief when the screaming started. It drifted down from the heights, the sound of men begging and pleading for mercy, amplified by some unnatural means so that we could make out every mutter, wheeze and prayer. The strangest thing was that we never heard the voices of the victims' tormentors. Whatever alien

technology broadcast our comrades' agony to us, it did not pick up the eldar's words at all.

'They don't have much of a sense of humour, do they?' said Ivan. He was trying to make a joke about it, but there was tension in his voice.

'They are trying to break our morale,' said Anton. 'To make us doubt ourselves and our commanders.'

'Maybe,' I said.

'Maybe?'

'Maybe they just enjoy doing this. Maybe it's how they amuse themselves between fights. Maybe they just want to frighten us. They feed on fear and pain. You heard what Bael said.'

'I am starting to wonder why we came here,' said Anton. He was trying too hard to sound casual. His face was pale and he kept licking his lips. He scanned the slopes with the sniper rifle. He caught sight of something and nodded; he stopped swivelling the barrel, licked his lips and squeezed the trigger ever so gently. Somewhere on the slope, a figure dropped. Anton grunted in satisfaction.

'Got the bastard.' I wondered how he had done it. After all, one of those helmets had almost withstood a direct hit at close range.

I hadn't realised I had spoken aloud until Anton replied. 'You don't aim for the head. There are weak spots in the armour at the joints, at the armpits, at the throat. If you hit them there you hurt them. I'm not saying you'll kill them this way, mind, but you will hurt them. Let's see how they like a taste of their own medicine.'

There was a viciousness in his voice I had never heard before, and a fear greater than anything I had ever seen in him before, although it was still under control. Like any veteran soldier, Anton was used to being scared. He just would not let it get the better of him. It was the viciousness that was worrying me, though. It seemed the longer we faced the eldar, the more they brought out elements of their character in us. I wondered if it were some sort of evil magic, but then I realised it was simply that as fear begets fear, cruelty begets cruelty. The eldar were easy to hate as well as fear.

Was it possible that if we stayed here long enough and survived we would become like them? You hear stories of such things whispered sometimes, of troops who face Chaos worshippers becoming Chaos worshippers in the end. Perhaps evil is contagious, like a disease. If it were so, the eldar across

there would definitely be plague carriers.

Well if that were the case, Macharius was a surgeon, I thought. I hoped he was getting ready to carry out an operation.

The defensive perimeter had been reconfigured. It formed a wedge now, centred on the main temple, which Macharius had chosen to use as his base. Units were being moved within it, to counter the threat of any eldar emerging from the depths. The men moved decisively to obey their instructions, but there was a nervousness to them.

We stood on the roof of the temple and watched the action. Lightning strike fighters raced overhead to strafe the eldar position. Strange bat-winged eldar vehicles rose to meet them, and a dogfight erupted overhead as some of the Imperial fighters peeled off to defend the ground attack planes and the eldar sought to get on their tails. We cheered as the fighter-bombers delivered their payloads of death.

One by one, the fights broke up into individual duels as the craft raced out of sight along the mountain valleys, leaving only jet contrails and the thunderous roar of their engines as evidence they had passed.

At least we had some air cover, I thought, and they were making sorties. One by one, the eldar vehicles returned to their base, wherever that was. No human planes came into sight, and I had no idea whether they survived or not. Such is the soldier's eye view of war. You catch fragments of a bigger picture, but not enough to comprehend it all. See things that pose questions that are never answered. Witness deaths that may be meaningless or heroic, but you never know at the time.

Just as those thoughts went through my mind, I saw another massive wave of eldar swarming over the ramparts, probing into our lines.

'Time to get back inside,' said Anton. 'It looks like our services may soon be needed.'

'Indeed.'

I heard the roar of heavy weapons outside the temple. The sound echoed down the chamber a fraction of a second after I heard the faint noise from Macharius's headset. The battle seemed to have hit a new height of frenzy. Looking at the intricate patterns on the command tables it was impossible to tell who was winning. The eldar had penetrated our outer perimeter. Our

lines were collapsing and our men were in retreat. Huge holes in our defences let them punch through. I wondered if, for the first time, I were about to witness Macharius lose a battle. Given the nature of our foes this would be a bad time for it.

Macharius gave clipped orders in response to reports from field commanders. I had no idea what was going on, but he clearly did. As ever he had the whole battlefield held in his mind and was able to build a clear picture of what was going on from mere fragments of information and supposition. The approach of danger did not faze him.

He looked up, glanced at us and said, 'Hold yourself in readiness. The xenos are about to hit this section of the temple.' I wondered how he could be so controlled under the circumstances.

Victory is mine. We have penetrated their lines. In orbit, my fleet is slowly overwhelming the enemy vessel. My forces sweep through the gaps they have punched in the enemy's defences. They have almost reached the temple complex that this Macharius has made his headquarters. Hopefully they will capture him, and I will be able to have a few words before I feast upon his essence. All the signs point to the fact that the Gate of Ancients is about to open. I have timed everything to perfection, as ever.

Even as the joy of victory burns in my mind, a few small things niggle at me. Where are the Space Marines? Only hours ago they were hunting my force through the corridors, engaged in a bloody war of attrition. Now they are nowhere to be found. Could it be they have sensed the coming defeat and fled the field of battle?

No matter, I will hunt them down later. Now it is time to make my way to the gate. Later there will be time to celebrate this victory properly.

We checked our weapons again. Anton's throat bulged nervously as he swallowed. He was clearly not delighted by the prospect of getting to grips with the eldar again. I could not blame him for it.

Drake looked at us and said, 'Stay close to me.'

'As long as you stay close to him,' Ivan said, nodding in the direction of Macharius. If his tone upset the inquisitor, Drake gave no sign. He merely smiled coldly.

At that moment something ricocheted across the room and took one of the

Lion Guard in the throat. He fell gasping, his skin turning pale, his mouth open in a silent scream.

Macharius took one last look at the tactical display and gave a series of orders, with quick, clipped commands. Clearly he intended to go down fighting till the bitter end.

A group of xenos bounded in, with gravity-defying grace. Their shots took out a target every time they aimed. I tipped a table end over end and dived behind it, stuck my head up and aimed my shotgun at where I had last seen one of the eldar. It was not there. Looking up I saw it descending from above me. I rolled onto my back and pulled the trigger of the shotgun. The blast caught the eldar on the chest and lifted it upwards. It had not killed it, though. It swung its weapon to bear on me.

Anton's rifle spoke from nearby and a heavy calibre shell put a huge dent in the xenos's helmet. It did not penetrate it, but I doubted it had done the alien much good. The bullet must have driven part of the armour through the eldar's skull. It twisted head over heels and landed in a sprawl across another map table.

Macharius strode through the carnage, firing his bolt pistol while giving orders into his mouthpiece. He did not let the swirl of melee around him distract him from taking charge of the battle. The screams of the dying, the muzzle-flare of weapons, the presence of death hovering at his shoulder did not break his concentration. If anything they seemed to make him more focused as if something in him drew strength from the carnage all around him.

I glanced around to make sure there were no eldar closing with him, then gave my attention back to my surroundings. The remaining eldar had gone down while I was looking elsewhere. Macharius stood over the corpse of one, blood covering his armour, brains splattering his shoulderguard. None of it belonged to him.

Macharius surveyed the chamber, took stock of the situation in a moment and then returned to giving orders to our embattled perimeter. I counted dead. Nineteen of the Lion Guard and half a dozen of the tech-adepts were down. I counted five eldar. It was a better ratio than we had managed on the ship. I was not sure why. Maybe we had been ready for them this time. Maybe they had less room to manoeuvre. Or maybe they had simply been overconfident having made their way so far into the temple.

Suddenly Macharius stopped giving orders. He just stood there, looking satisfied. Drake glanced at him. Macharius said, ‘The eldar are beaten.’

I looked at the hologrid. The gaps in our lines had closed. The eldar were trapped within them, caught in a killing ground where the massed batteries of our armoured vehicles could catch them. In their lust to kill, in their desire to maim and slay, they had sacrificed their advantage and fought on a battlefield that played to our strengths. I heard the roar of heavy batteries outside.

Looking out I saw Thunderhawk gunships and Avenger strike fighters strafing the eldar. Once again, Macharius had turned around a battle, made an opponent fight where he should not have. He had turned the trap itself into a trap.

Logan Grimnar entered the chamber, looked around and nodded. ‘The xenos are well beaten,’ he said. ‘I can see you have no need of my help here.’

It sounded like high praise indeed coming from him.

No! In the time it has taken for me to get to the gate, the battle has turned. A sick feeling settles in my stomach. The enemy flight was but a ruse to lure my troops into the killing ground between the temples. Their vehicles are being smashed by the superior firepower of the human batteries. The escaping crews are being overwhelmed by the sheer weight of human numbers. Who would have thought that a human would have the wit to turn his weakness into a strength or that an eldar commander would have turned a position of strength into a weakness.

There is nothing left but to flee. The only way out for me is through the Gate of Ancients. There is still a chance that I can claim the prize I came for and turn this situation around. I must take it. I must.

Drake swayed dizzily. He put a hand to his brow. ‘The Way is open.’

A messenger raced up to the blood-spattered Lord High Commander. ‘General Macharius,’ he said. ‘Reports from the labyrinth. The eldar attacked our position down there. They have seized the portal entrance.’

‘The last attack was a distraction,’ Macharius said. He smiled warily. ‘The enemy knew the portal was going to open and took advantage of the last big attack to seize it. Now we need to stop him before he finds whatever it is he

is seeking.’

We raced through the vast depths of the temple complex, past the time-worn statues of forgotten alien gods, moving towards a gate that opened on we knew not what. Faint shivering passed through the rock, reverberations from distant explosions where man and xenos fought for their lives in the valley above.

We reached the gate room. Bodies were strewn everywhere, human and eldar. It had been a brutal fight with no quarter given by either side. By the looks of things, the eldar had not even slowed down to perform their ritual torture. They had been in too much of a hurry, and it was obvious why.

Where once there had merely been stone, now there was something else. The whole area within the carved arch shimmered. It was like looking onto the surface of a pool into which many different types of luminescent dye had been poured. The colours moved and swirled. The area where the rock had been seemed fluid. It felt as if you could dive into it, the way you could dive into water.

An officer raced towards Macharius. His green tunic was ripped, his face was marked by a dozen small cuts, his eyes had the haunted look I had come to recognise in the faces of those who had faced the eldar at close quarters.

‘Report,’ said Macharius. He tilted his head to one side to indicate he was listening. Over his headset, he was still giving orders to our forces outside the temple as they dealt with the xenos attack.

‘They came at us out of the tunnels, sir. About twenty of them. We had our weapons ready but they cut us down from behind.’ He looked deeply distressed. ‘There was one of them… He was so fast, nothing could stop him.’

‘You killed some of them,’ Macharius said. He counted corpses. ‘Most of them, if your numbers are correct.’

I saw at least a dozen eldar corpses. Grimnar sniffed the air. ‘About twenty would be correct. The surviving xenos vanished through the gate. Their scent track ends at this wall.’ His frown of distaste let us know how unnatural this was. ‘They had the Fist with them.’

‘They did, Lord High Commander,’ said the officer. ‘We thought we had them, there were only a few left, but they jumped into the colours and

vanished like, like…’ Confusion showed on his face. He struggled to find the words to describe what he had witnessed.

‘Did you see what happened to them?’ Drake asked urgently.

‘They seemed to… recede, growing smaller and smaller, vanishing into the distance, although they did not look as though they were moving. It was very strange.’

‘The gate is open. Wherever it leads to.’ Drake said, looking at Macharius. ‘What do we do now? Wait for them to come back through?’

‘We don’t know how this thing works,’ said Grimnar. ‘They may not emerge here. They may find their way out somewhere else.’

‘This is the only way in or out that we know of,’ said Drake. He looked thoughtful and more than a little afraid. Grimnar sniffed the air and appeared to come to a decision. He sniffed the air once more. ‘They have the Fist with them.’ He spoke something in a tongue I did not recognise, a guttural, barking language that might have been his native tongue. He nodded his head as though receiving an answer over some sealed channel on the comm-net.

‘I cannot allow the Fist of Russ to fall into such foul hands.’

He bounded forwards into the shimmering surface of the wall, and I saw then the strangeness the officer had mentioned. It was as if he were falling away from us, moving at great speed while shrinking in size, down a long tunnel filled with a multicoloured mist. I caught sight of him less and less until finally he vanished. It felt as if I had been watching him for hours but in reality only heartbeats had passed.

‘We don’t know whether it is possible to survive in there without protective gear,’ said Drake. ‘Or whether there is any way back. Or what might happen if the gateway closes while we are still within.’

‘Lemuel,’ Macharius said.

‘Sir?’

‘Inspect the gate.’ He pointed and he could only mean one thing. For a moment only, I considered refusing, but that would have meant being shot. I took a step forward, obeying Macharius almost instinctively, and touched the surface of the gate. I pulled down my rebreather and took another step.

It was cool and I passed through it. It was like stepping into liquid only for a moment, and then I found myself somewhere else, in a long corridor lit by a strange shimmering glow. I could see no source of it, but I could see

ancient eldar statues reminiscent of those in the valley.

It was cold. I kept holding my breath, unwilling to breathe in air that might prove poisonous. My heart pounded in my chest. My lungs started to feel as if they would burst. I let out my breath and inhaled. The air tasted strange but it was breathable.

I took another breath and felt nothing. My lungs did not burn. I was not poisoned. I checked the hazard monitor on my wrist. There were no indicators of danger.

I turned to the wall and looked back. Through the polychromatic, oily shimmering I saw the others looking at me. They stood frozen like statues with no sign of motion.

I frowned. There was something odd about what I was seeing, but I could not put my finger on exactly what. It was like looking at a picture, a still life, not at living, breathing people. I paused for a second, at once anxious to move and reluctant to do so. This would be the moment of truth. I tried to step back through the portal. Once again, the cold liquid surface of the gate closed around me. I felt resistance and wondered whether I was trapped in this strange place.

Everything seemed to speed up. Macharius and the others started moving again. ‘It’s breathable,’ I said.

‘How would you know?’ Anton asked. ‘You were only gone a second.’

Something must have shown on my face.

‘Time flows differently beyond the gate,’ said Drake. ‘Unless I am much mistaken.’

‘A heartbeat here was at least a minute there,’ I said.

Drake nodded as though I had confirmed something he had suspected. ‘It is often the case when you step beyond the normal boundaries of our continuum.’

‘What?’ Anton said. He clearly did not understand, but Drake was in no mood to explain it to him.

A thought struck me. ‘Sir, that means that the eldar may be hours ahead of us down the trail in there. Grimnar too.’

Macharius nodded, grasping the point at once. The longer we stood there, the bigger the lead the eldar would have over us. What seemed like minutes to us might be hours or even days in there.

‘We go through,’ Macharius said. ‘Now.’

He was already stepping into the portal. Drake was following. There was nothing else to do but accompany them. I took a long step into cool strangeness.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

‘What is this place?’ Macharius asked. We stood on the far side of the portal, watching the remainder of our force very slowly enter the gate. Each slight movement seemed to take minutes. There was a moment of strangeness when they passed through to our side. Their limbs blurred as if their motions were speeding up, and then, to all intents and purposes, they looked normal.

‘I think it may be something the eldar built, a pathway into the beyond.’

‘Why would the eldar who stole it bring the Fist of Russ here?’

Drake paused. An odd expression flickered across his face. ‘This is a roadway through infinity. The eldar use them to pass through space.’

‘You saw that in Bael’s mind?’ Macharius said.

Drake nodded. ‘This one was a sacred path once, and it leads to something awesome. Or at least that is what I assume.’

‘Or what he wanted you to assume. Is it possible he could have projected false memories into your mind?’

‘Certainly,’ said Drake. ‘I am sure such was his intention. The eldar are clever and deceptive, and I do not trust anything I saw in his thoughts, but it is all we have to go on.’

Macharius laughed. ‘There are only two ways we can go, forwards or back.’

‘I can sense the presence of the Fist here,’ said Drake. ‘I know which way they went. There is something odd, though, a sense of a presence I do not

like.’

Looking at the nearby statues I saw that one of them had been marked. It showed a crude rune in a similar style to those emblazoned on Grimnar’s armour. Just some lines quickly scratched with a blade. It took me a moment to realise what it was, then I pointed it out to Macharius.

‘The Space Wolf is leaving us a trail,’ said Macharius. ‘Let’s move out.’

‘Leaving us a trail or making sure he could find his own way back,’ Anton muttered, so low that only I could hear him. To tell the truth it did not matter. It was still reassuring. At least we had something to go on and a path back if we survived.

We moved along the path, a company of men in green tunics, along with several squads of Drake’s storm troopers. I was wondering whether we should send back for reinforcements.

From what I had seen of the eldar, six of them might be able to take us, particularly if they understood this environment and we did not. Macharius did not wait though, and he knew his business.

Of course, there was the distortion of time that passing through the gate caused. By the time help was summoned from outside, days might have passed in here. We had no option but to race ahead if we were ever going to catch up with the xenos and retrieve the Fist of Russ.

The place that we moved through was the spookiest I had ever seen. The air was close and still and oddly perfumed. My skin tingled as I marched as if it had been exposed to some strange drug. Drake’s hazard monitors told us there were no chemical or biological agents present, but it was possible that they had malfunctioned, or whatever was there was too subtle for them to detect. It was not a reassuring thought.

The way ahead seemed to be some sort of tunnel. Massive arches inscribed with odd xenos runes held the ceiling in place. There were times when that vanished, though, and we caught sight of odd vistas. Sometimes through crystal we saw the strange stars of alien skies. Sometimes we saw huge shifting masses of colour that reminded me of chemical cloud formations in the skies of hive-worlds I had visited. The path was wide enough for multiple battle tanks to pass abreast. I wondered who had built it and why.

The thought occurred to me that perhaps the Valley of the Ancients was not a sacred temple site, or at least not just one. Perhaps it was the terminus

for this pathway. Perhaps the whole structure was intended to anchor the path in our reality. I pushed the thought to one side and moved closer to Macharius and Drake.

The inquisitor looked particularly queasy and I cannot say I blamed him. There was something in the strangeness of our surroundings that was getting on my nerves. Given his power and his sensitivity it must have been a thousand times worse for him.

I noticed that many of the great statues that lined the roadway had been defaced. In places, it looked as if they had fused or melted under the impact of gigantic las-beams. In other places they were oddly altered. Their features had a lewd look to them. Some of them had multiple arms which ended in claws. Others had… exaggerated physical features. The clean lines that had been the mark of so many of the statues outside were disturbed. There was something about these ones that suggested the crazed uncleanness of the followers of Chaos.

So far we'd had no problem following the right trail because there was only one. We had only two directions in which to go, forwards or back towards the exit. I began to notice that in places the stonework seemed eaten away and strange pools of multicoloured light were visible in the gaps. These swirled and shimmered in ways that hurt the eye. At times the clouds swept forward and billowed flat as if they were pressed against a wall of glass so translucent as to be invisible. When we passed these gaps, I felt nauseous and afraid. It was as if an oppressive presence waited just out of sight, ready to pounce, and its mere closeness was enough to set my nerves to jangling.

'I like this not,' said Drake. 'We are close to Chaos. This is a place where the Ruinous Powers have made their will felt.'

'That does not bode well for our quest,' said Macharius.

'I am starting to feel as if nothing does,' said Drake. 'Perhaps this was all a mistake.'

'Come, my friend, now is not the time for such talk, not when we are so close to finding what we seek. Just think, we will soon have one of the Imperium's most sacred relics in our possession.'

'I wonder whether its time here has contaminated it. I sense evil in this place.'

'Surely a relic of such holiness could not be tainted, even by the Ruinous

Powers?’

‘There is nothing that Chaos cannot turn to its purposes, nothing. So I was taught. So I believe. It is why we must be eternally vigilant, with ourselves most of all.’

Macharius looked around at our surroundings. If he were daunted by being cut off from our world within the toils of this ancient, alien place he gave no sign of it. ‘We will do what needs to be done,’ he said.

It occurred to me then that we were very far from home, and that there was a very real chance that we would never return. Less than an hour before I had been celebrating an unexpected victory. Now I was almost sick with fear of the unknown. I wondered if the eldar had known about this or whether they were as surprised by it as we were.

This is a strange and terrible place. It is not at all what I expected. The evil that destroyed my ancestors has touched this webway. All of the signs point to one thing. They created this vault thinking that it would preserve them from the power that was devouring their very souls. Instead, it looks as though they entombed themselves within it. There was no escape for them, here or any other place. The only question that remains is whether the evil that destroyed them still lurks within or whether, lacking anything else to devour, it perished from lack of prey.

My followers are nervous. They do not know why we are here. They think that we are fleeing from a battle that could easily have been won. They think that I am afraid of the Space Marines and what they might do to us. So far none of them have had the courage to say anything, but I can tell that it is only a matter of time. Sileria, in particular, blames me for the loss of Bael. It seems they were, as I suspected, lovers. Well, he was no great loss, and I doubt whether she will be either.

I can see why they are edgy. There is something here that plays on the nerves, that makes even those who are used to causing fear, afraid. This place still reverberates with echoes of ancient terror and ancient pain, and delicious as that would normally be, there is something about it, something tainted that breeds suspicion in our minds.

They think I should be on the surface directing the destruction of my enemies. I can see that accusation in the very body language of every eldar with me. They still do not understand how quickly victory was turned to

defeat. Or perhaps they think if I had not been so desperate to get to the gate I might have saved the situation. Perhaps that is nothing less than the truth.

I would have liked nothing better than to direct the destruction of the humans on the planet's surface, but it is much more important that I should be the first to get my hands upon the ancient reality engine.

I console myself with the thought that at least there is no one here to get in our way, to stop us from finally achieving the goal I set myself all of those centuries ago. I know that time flows differently here. It was one of the warnings that the ancient books contained. I shall let my troops rest before we make our final push towards our ultimate destination.

Then we shall see what we shall see.

The roadway curved downwards and things changed once more. It was hard to put a finger on exactly when and how the changes started. All I know is that the sense of being watched by an alien presence increased. Our surroundings appeared ever more distorted. Larger and larger patches of strangely glowing colours appeared in the walls, and it was not good to look too closely at them. I had no idea how long we had marched. My wrist chronometer said it was only a couple of hours, but this was a place where time had no meaning. It was just as likely that we would return to discover no time had passed as to return and find out we had been gone for days or weeks or years.

Perhaps we would turn out to be like those ships' crews who had been lost between the stars for centuries and returned to find out all their descendants were dead. I had heard tales of those who had entered ancient, haunted vaults for what they thought was one night and emerged to discover a century had passed. Had they entered a place like this?

The way ahead started running through larger chambers. It remained a massive roadway, paved and marked with ancient runes. Sometimes, off the road, we would see robed skeletons lying there. Macharius would not allow us to depart from the trail, but the little I saw of them suggested something inhuman to me. They were too long, too thin, and something in the way they sprawled was not the way a human body would have lain.

The roof of the chamber started to shimmer and change, and sometimes pictures came into view there, gigantic images of godlike beings who seemed to be looking down on us, or into the area through which we

walked. Sometimes they were scenes or parts of scenes, broken images with no pattern that I could see and only one common theme. In all of them were tall, beautiful creatures, in surroundings similar to the ones in which we were walking through.

They were eldar, like the ones we had fought physically. Their expressions had nothing in common with the cruelty of Bael and his kindred, though. These people looked peaceful and pleasant and full of love. Of course, who am I to judge whether they were or not. We are taught to be wary of the xenos, rightfully so. Perhaps this was just a deception or a trap, but some deep seated instinct told me that this was not the case.

We marched on. I prayed to the Emperor that we would find the eldar and get this over with. There was something about this pathway that frightened me more than death.

This place has been strangely altered, tainted by She Who Thirsts or her followers. The path looks like many others I have travelled, but I can see that it is frayed, that the very fabric of the powers that make it up is unravelling. It is only a matter of time before the whole structure is swallowed and another of our ancestors' creations is devoured.

Of all the things they made, this is one of the few I would regret the destruction of. The webway allows us to travel between places and worlds, but this is not like that. It is a vault, a secure place, a protected place. It was intended to keep safe things of value to our ancestors. It was intended to be a refuge when their universe went mad. In their weakness, they sought not to confront and overmaster what threatened them but to hide from it. Their own spinelessness betrayed them.

They thought they had dug themselves a hole to hide in, a burrow where they could hide from the predators that pursued them. It is obvious they were wrong. They brought what they sought to avoid with them, and when they sealed the doors behind them, they trapped themselves with it. The irony is enough to make me laugh. My guards do not understand why I do, but they echo my mirth. Even here they look to me for leadership. They are not afraid but nervous.

So far none have audibly expressed any criticism of my leadership, nor are they likely to, for they know that I will not stand for it. Yet I sense their doubts. I have my own. Memories of the last few minutes of the battle on

the surface keep coming back to me. Who would have thought mere apes could have fought so well? My followers are inclined to attribute the setback to the presence of those known as the Adeptus Astartes, and there is some truth in that. I am the only one who knows that is not the whole story.

There is an intelligence guiding the humans, commanding them, a mind of subtlety and great tactical gifts. I have seen it in the traps it has laid for our forces. Every time we thought we found a weakness, it was a snare. We have taken far heavier casualties fighting the humans than even the presence of Space Marines would have suggested.

Warrior for warrior, they are the equal of any of my force and the superiors of most, but they represent the merest fraction of the enemy's number. Those with them should never have been able to withstand our swift and merciless attacks. Their weak spirits should have been broken, their slow minds incapable of understanding the speed of our assaults. Yet somehow they not only stood their ground but inflicted devastating losses on us. Many noble bodies will need to be rebuilt after this. Many fragments of flesh reclaimed.

If I return now, without that which I seek, I will be a laughing stock. My enemies will whisper about how I was defeated by an ape. I will lose face and my enemies will not fear me as they should. I begin to suspect that perhaps I have been lured here by those very enemies. Perhaps it is no human mind that guides them but something else.

I push such thoughts to one side. I must concentrate on my goals. I must find the reality engine.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

We marched and we marched and we marched through that timeless, sunless place, knowing that the eldar and Grimnar were still ahead of us. I looked at my chronometer and found out to my surprise that it had been twelve hours since we had set off. We had already been up for most of a day before that, and had fought and fled. Some of the men looked weary. I could see that Macharius was reluctant to call a halt but understood the need to do so.

He raised his hand and said, ‘We cannot march forever. We shall sleep for a few hours and move on, rested and ready to face the Emperor’s enemies.’

He himself looked capable of marching on then and there, but like all good leaders he knew it was unwise to push his troops beyond their limits, except when it was absolutely necessary.

The path passed through a large parkland in a huge chamber. We were surrounded by forests of strange looking trees with feathery leaves. I had never seen anything like them before. There was something unnatural about them. I doubted they had ever been planted in the soil of any world colonised by men. They looked a perfect backdrop for the eldar, though.

Macharius divided us into watches and we threw ourselves down, using our packs for pillows. My head no sooner hit the ground than I was asleep and my dreams were weird and haunted.

At first I remembered my early life in the slums of Belial. I saw my father, old and worn out by work. I saw the guild factorums in which Anton and

Ivan and I had laboured. I was chased through them by gangsters. They were going to pull off my fingers with red-hot pliers. There was something daemonic in their faces.

Somehow they followed me into the camp where I did my basic training for the Guard, but now they were instructors, always threatening with the pliers if I did not learn fast enough, and I knew I could not.

They were officers howling commands at me in the jungles of Jurasik and the lava flows of Karsk. They pursued me through the airless tunnels of the asteroid fortresses of Mahagan and the dimly lit streets of Hive Skarthius, where skull-masked priests led armies of grey-skinned men.

As the dreams progressed I became aware of changes in my surroundings. I was still being pursued, sometimes through familiar landscapes, then through places that resembled the valley above – but around its edges were the streets of a city, which extended down into the tunnels below.

At first the streets were empty, but as the chase continued they were crowded by those thin-lipped, fine-featured xenos we had seen modelled in the statuary. They watched me being pursued and they made no move to help, although they seemed interested in a vague and distant way.

I dived into the middle of a crowd of them, determined to lose the things that hounded me. Suddenly there were more of the xenos and they no longer noticed me, crowds of them went about their business, got on with their lives. Somehow the urgency of the pursuit fled and I knew I was, for the moment, safe.

I paused and studied my reflection in the mirrored window of a shop, and I saw now that my form was not human but eldar. I was taller and thinner and far better looking. With the strange logic of dreams I did not question the transformation. My own life as a soldier of the Emperor was the dream now. Memories crowded into my head, of my life as an eldar, of a family and a house and an existence that felt as real as my waking career as an Imperial Guardsman.

I looked up and once again my surroundings were changed. I was in the valley above, but now it was entirely occupied by a prosperous city of stone and crystal, of egg-shaped buildings and oval towers with minaret spires. I strode up a long curved walkway and looked down upon the valley. There were temples there, huge and ancient and familiar. The gods looked down on their blessed followers. Looping over everything was a massive

roadway, reminiscent of the one we had walked on to get through the gate. It floated over the buildings and vanished into the surrounding mountains.

I noticed in the streets that there was a preacher, robed in gold and purple and green. He smiled beatifically at passers-by and preached words of love and charity and hope. He told of the coming of a new god that would lead the eldar once more to greatness of soul and spirit, who would provide guidance to the lost, hope to the dejected, peace to the troubled. He would lead the eldar to a life of simple, endless pleasure.

The priest spoke, and folk listened to the sweetness of his voice and words. I listened too, and I was troubled without knowing exactly why. My people were at the height of their greatness. There was no poverty, no hunger, no hatred in our hearts. What could such things mean to us? There was a sense that all problems had been solved. The only things that troubled us were of the spirit; we faced the boredom of a serene, happy existence. There were troubling reports of great wars among the other races, but we took no part in them.

Things shifted once more. Time had passed. The city no longer looked so clean and clear. The lights seemed dimmer. There were more shadows everywhere, but not because of catastrophe. It was because the people of the city wanted it this way. They wanted shadow now. They wanted quiet places where they could move apart and smoke their pipes and lie in each other’s arms and pass their time most pleasantly. The priests in gold and purple and green moved among them, smiling approvingly, speaking their words of tolerance and comfort, encouraging the folk in their pursuit of pleasure.

Life was sweet, and desires were to be embraced. Experience of any sort was good. I heard sermons preached that soon the bright golden god would appear and speak his word and the universe would be transformed in the light of his presence. Listening to the words I felt a sense of falseness and was disturbed, but I took another puff from the narcotic hookah and reached out for my lovers and found peace.

More time passed. The people had turned their faces from the old gods and swarmed into the temples of the new god, who was yet to be born. Shrines lay neglected. Offerings went unmade. Life had altered strangely. People ignored their daily business now, lost themselves in sleep and the consumption of narcotics and hallucinogenics.

Few people went about their business by day, but emerged only at night, to revel and indulge in orgies of lovemaking and drug-taking and the consumption of hallucinogenic wine. The priests led the revels now and preached the word of the imminence of their god, and people watched and waited, sensing that soon the world would change forever. In the tunnels below, new statues were erected to the god. It was not like the friendly beings of old.

Not everyone approved. Not everyone took part in the revels. Other preachers appeared, saying that something was amiss, that some great disaster was imminent, that soon there would be a cosmic crisis that would destroy eldar civilisation. Few paid attention. Sometimes those who spoke out were found beaten to death or overdosed on narcotics. Sometimes I saw priests in gold and purple and green standing over their corpses.

Some took their families and belongings and left, taking flight to new planets or setting out for the great world-ships. Some built a great vault, a safe place into which they could retreat within the webways. They began to experiment with devices that would tap the flows of power, let them restructure reality.

Most stayed, too drugged to move, too overwhelmed by the pleasures of life to do anything other than take part in the day-long rituals in the temples of the new god. I sensed a mighty presence looming over everything, biding its time, waiting its moment. I was not alone in this. The sense of presence, of being at the end of something, gave the revels a desperate fury. People turned to darker pleasures. Blood flowed in the streets, and not all the victims of violence were unwilling participants. All sense of proportion, of restraint, departed.

Now, day after day, night after night passed to the beating of great drums, and dancing and revelry to the sound of hellish, discordant piping. Eldar ran naked through the streets, bodies covered in tattoos written in blood, or woven from scars. Sacrifices were made everywhere to the new god as all vestige of sanity seemed to be extinguished. The priests in gold and purple and green cavorted lewdly in the streets, leading the revels, consuming the potions with the greatest enthusiasm, speaking mad words of revelation that eager-eared listeners drank in. The day of embodiment was fast approaching.

The sermons grew ever less restrained, ever more vehement. The priests

led the population in ritual chanting, in the defacing of the statues of the old gods, in the creation of newer and less wholesome idols. Under cover of night things began to appear that looked like people but whose limbs ended in claws. They danced in the moonlit streets surrounded by clouds of intoxicating perfumes that drove all those who breathed them in to greater and greater heights of hedonism.

The day arrived. The sky split. On a thousand worlds, the god appeared and looked down on his people and smiled. And they screamed for they saw at last the visage of the being they worshipped, and they were afraid. Their screams lasted but an instant for the newborn god breathed in and their souls were sucked from their bodies and drawn into his maw.

With every soul devoured the god grew in power and strength. It became harder and harder for those who resisted to endure. Starting with the weaker souls, he gained strength until not even the mightiest could stand against the strain. The worst of it was that even as they died and were devoured, their screams of terror turned to screams of ecstasy. Hearing these, those who resisted, resisted no longer and the mad scramble to escape doom became a willing submission to it.

Bodies fell in the street, drained of spirit and animation, as the daemon-god fed. The streets of the city became filled with corpses. Ships fell from the sky, no longer piloted. Vehicles slewed off roads as their drivers were absorbed into the presence of the newborn deity. In moments, stillness settled on the city as all of its inhabitants died and were transformed into part of the new entity.

Lights still flickered, signs still flashed, but there was no one there to stand witness. An end had come to the city, and I knew that all across the galaxy, on every world the eldar had inhabited, it was the same. A new evil had been born, weaned on the souls of an entire people, a creature of cosmic power and malevolence, a new power of Chaos destined to strive with the others for dominance of the universe.

In my mind I saw thousands of suddenly empty worlds, and I felt the new god’s presence. A single titanic word echoed through my mind in the aftermath of its birth, a name: Slaanesh. I woke screaming. I was surrounded by men doing the same.

Macharius stood staring into the distance. His face was grim. He had not

been among the sleepers. He looked down at Drake who had been. The inquisitor's face was very pale.

'This is an accursed place,' he said. 'We should leave here. Our souls are in peril.'

'We have not found the Fist, and I would not surrender it to our enemies.'

'It avails us not if we find the Fist and lose our souls. We would merely be bringing a great spiritual peril out into the Imperium.'

Macharius stared at him, hard, obviously considering his words carefully. 'I have come a long way to find the Fist and I will not turn back now. I will not let so sacred a symbol of the Imperium fall into the hands of those eldar scum.'

'They are corrupt and they are suited to this place. We are not. The longer we remain, the more in peril our souls are.'

'I saw nothing save men whose sleep was troubled.'

'If their dreams were like mine, they were more than troubled. Lemuel, what did you dream?'

Both of them looked at me. I told them.

'I saw the same,' said Anton.

'And I,' said Ivan.

Other soldiers chipped in. Their descriptions were similar to ours. They were not exactly alike in detail but in broad strokes were the same. They had witnessed the destruction of worlds and the birth of an evil god. It was the sort of knowledge that Drake could quite probably have had us put to death for possessing, if he'd so desired.

'I will not turn my back on this quest because of a dream, no matter how frightening or how many people had it,' said Macharius.

'The fact that so many men had it is a sign,' said Drake. 'And not a good one. It is a warning.'

'It was a dream.'

'There is something about this place,' said Drake. 'Some echo of distant terrible events resounds through it. The further we go, the stronger those echoes will become.'

'I am not turning back,' said Macharius and it was a simple statement of fact. He was not afraid, and he would not allow us to be either. 'Nor is any man under my command.'

His eagle-keen gaze swept over us, and we all felt the force of it. I stood

straighter when he looked at me and so did every man present. All of us believed that if we showed the slightest sign of fear we would be personally betraying him, and none of us wanted to do that. The matter was settled with that one look. Not even Drake had the stomach for argument after that.

'We've rested enough,' said Macharius. 'We must push on.'

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The further we marched, the stranger it became. The walls of the tunnel became lighter and lighter until they were almost translucent. The ghastly multicoloured fog that had marked the entrance to this place was visible through them. Occasionally it cleared, and I saw snatches of scenes that were shockingly familiar.

Sometimes I saw a single figure, an eldar who resembled someone I had seen in my dreams. Once it was one of the ghastly priests of the new god smiling and nodding at me encouragingly. Another time it was the haunted face of one of the xenos who had walked the city streets. I never saw them directly or for very long. I caught sight of them out of the corner of my eye, had the merest flicker of recognition, and then they were gone as if they had never been, disappeared like shadows when a candle is snuffed out.

It was maddening. I could not be sure I was seeing anything. They were as real as the colours you see when you close your eyes and massage your eyelids and just as temporary. I glanced to my left at Anton and I could see he was queasy as well. Sometimes he looked swiftly to his right or left, as though he were trying to catch a glimpse of something that was not there, or which moved too quickly from his line of sight.

He saw I was looking at him and he turned to me and said, ‘I don’t like this place.’

For once, he was not whining or complaining, simply stating a fact. Normally I would have mocked him, but now I could only agree.

‘So you’re seeing them too,’ said Ivan quietly.

‘Seeing what?’ I asked.

‘The ghosts or dreams, or whatever they are.’

‘Maybe.’

Drake dropped back to march along beside us. He was troubled, and it was a measure of exactly how troubled he was that he chose to talk with us. ‘They are echoes, imprinted in the very fabric of this place, echoes of the people who were once here, of events that once happened, of things that once were.’

He sounded utterly convinced of that and very afraid. He glanced towards Macharius doubtfully. He clearly believed the Lord High Commander was leading us towards disaster.

‘We’ve been in worse places,’ I said. ‘Faced worse foes. He’s led us through all of it.’

‘Where is the foe he can beat here?’ said Drake quietly. ‘What is there for him to out-think, to outfight. If there was something to defeat, he could, no doubt about it, but what we face here are shadows and memories, and not even our shadows and memories but those of deviant xenos. This is a place of ghosts.’

Despite the quietness of his speech, Macharius heard him. Without turning his head, he said, ‘We have an objective and we have an enemy ahead of us. We will face the enemy and we will achieve our objective. Of that, have no doubt.’

‘And what then?’ Drake asked.

‘We shall cross that bridge when we come to it,’ said Macharius. ‘One thing is certain. We will not give up now.’

The corridors darkened. The road swooped downwards, descending for what felt a very long way. We kept marching. Every now and again we spotted a mark in Fenrisian runes that let us know that Grimnar had been here before us. It was strangely reassuring.

The air became ever more close and still. I found I was sweating and the tunic of my uniform was sticking to me. I was very tired but had no great desire to sleep again. I feared what I might dream, and what I might see in those dreams.

We came to a fork in the road and Macharius chose the right-hand branch.

There was a rune there. The roadway continued downwards. I wondered about this. If these paths ran beneath the surface of the planet we were down very deep now, but some instinct told me that we were not, that we were in a place far more alien and strange. There were more forks and the path looped more. I tried to picture the convolutions of the roadways unwinding around me, and I could not; it had become too bizarre and complex. Occasionally, a cold breeze blew out of somewhere, but it never lasted long and did not provide much relief from the heat.

It made me wonder about the eldar. Was this a natural temperature for them? It seemed possible that this heat was normal and comfortable for the builders of this odd labyrinth. But it was equally possible that the heat was the result of a malfunction in some xenos life support systems. There was ample evidence of dissolution and unmaking around us.

In places there were still statues. Many of them had been defaced and some of them looked downright daemonic. A few looked as if their stonework had been melted and remoulded into newer and more crude shapes, and then allowed to cool and settle again. I knew of no way of making stone do this, of course, but that is what it looked like. We trudged on and I began to feel that we were the ghosts, walking wearily through some limbo. Our whole purpose in being here seemed lost in the fog of tiredness and brain-stun.

I took a stimm tablet. As it fizzled away under my tongue I felt the alchemicals begin a losing battle against weariness. My sense of the strangeness of things began to ramp up. I was starting to feel as if somehow we were marching from one reality to another, from the world in which we had walked as men to the world of which I had dreamed.

Multiple shadows lengthened around us, products of many difficult-to-discern light sources. The click of our boot-heels on the stone of the roadway echoed into the distance. I found myself listening for some sign that someone somewhere had heard them and was coming to investigate. None came.

I looked at Drake. His face showed signs of awful strain as if the aura of this place were pressing down on him. He closed his eyes sometimes, and I could see his jaw moving as though he were grinding his teeth together. A faint nimbus of light played around his head as it tracked from side to side. He was still on the psychic trail of the eldar with the Fist, following it

hound-like with his uncanny senses.

At that moment, in my weariness, he looked as different from a normal man as one of the xenos. I suspect, at the end of the day, that is how most of us feel about psykers because it is, ultimately, the truth. They *are* different from us. They see things we don't, experience things we cannot, wield powers beyond our understanding. I could not begin to understand how this place must feel to him. I only knew it was bad enough to me.

Of all of us, only the Undertaker appeared untroubled. He kept moving mechanically, with no sign of weariness or emotion. Somehow, he looked right at home, a hollow shell of a man, amid the hollow shell of this alien place. Looking at him, it came to me that there are some mortal men who can be as strange and frightening in their own ways as psykers, and that he was one of them.

Anton took a slug from his canteen and then wiped sweat from his forehead. He looked off into the distance for a moment then said, 'I hope we find those bastards before the water gives out.'

'There are fountains here, we've passed them,' said Ivan.

'Yeah – but do you fancy drinking anything out of them?'

'I will if I have to,' said Ivan. 'And so will you.'

'I dreamed they flowed with blood,' Anton said. I wondered about that because I had dreamed no such thing. I wondered how different the substance of the others' dreams had been from mine.

'You'll drink it if you have to,' Ivan repeated. 'We all will.'

We emerged from the archway and saw what lay below us. It was a vast bowl in which lay the remains of a ruined city. It looked as if an angry god had stamped his foot and smashed it. I thought of the destruction I had seen in my dreams and realised that this was an exact mirror of it. I realised something else. Down there, in the centre of the ruins, was a tower, and at its tip and down its length lights were glowing. The road ran no further.

'It looks as though we have found what we were looking for,' said Macharius. He glanced at Drake. The inquisitor nodded.

At last, what I have so long sought is within my grasp. The Tower of Heaven stands before me and within it is the reality engine the ancients devised. It feels astonishing that I am finally here, having travelled so far and sought for so long. And yet now it is almost done. I will soon know

whether the secret exists or not.

It is clear that we are not alone here. At least one of the Space Wolves, possibly more, has followed us and is intent upon doing us harm. Talyn reports that he has seen other human troops passing into the city. They are not a huge force, yet they outnumber my own. Measures must be taken to stop them. I deploy the remainder of my warriors, giving them detailed instructions as to what they must do. They respond sullenly, seemingly unwilling at this final hurdle. I consider executing one or two as examples for the others, but it is pointless. I would simply be doing my enemies' work for them.

Instead, I remind Sileria and the others that we are trapped here, and the only way they are going to get out is if they do what I say. The argument sways them. They know there is no reasoning with the humans. They are beasts after all. They know also that it is in our best interests to fight together, and that I am their strongest warrior. Their chances are greatly increased by doing what I say, and they are at least bright enough to see that.

Once I am sure they understand what needs to be done, I step within the tower and begin to make my way towards my destiny. I still carry the ancient claw. I am unwilling to part with it. It has become a talisman of sorts for me, although whether for good or evil I cannot guess.

I felt a sense of excitement, the sort that you get before you go into combat. It came from the knowledge that one way or another a resolution was in sight, that we would find what we came for or we would find death.

I still felt tired but my head felt momentarily clearer, as if my brain realised it was going to have to make an effort to be alert if I were to live. I've heard tales of men being too tired to defend themselves. I've never encountered one in my career in the Imperial Guard. When the time comes, you fight for your life. Always.

We marched down into the ruins. I recognised something about this place from my dreams. A few of the shattered buildings looked familiar, and some of the open plazas, full of rubble and oddly changed statues. I thought about what I had seen in my dream and wondered whether there had been any truth in it. Was it possible that thousands of worlds had died to provide the energy that birthed a daemon-god? It seemed insane, but then the

universe often does.

One thing was certain, something terrible had happened here. The streets were full of skeletons and they had not belonged to human beings. The bones of the limbs were too elongated, the skulls too long and narrow; the eye sockets were of a different shape. When Anton counted, the mouths held more teeth, and they were smaller than any human teeth would be.

Some of the bones no longer looked like bones. They had a glassy, crystalline quality. I was reminded of the way some of the statues had been transmuted. Perhaps the same thing had happened here. I only know that the bones glittered in the eerie light in a way I have never seen before and hope never to see again.

Something had killed all these people and it had done so swiftly and terribly. A lot of the destruction was probably caused after the fact by all the usual small accidents that can happen when there is no one left to supervise a system. Fires that were not extinguished had spread, explosions caused by machines overheating and running out of control. The eldar technology looked nothing like our own, but I was willing to bet that such things could happen.

And yet there was ample evidence to the contrary. There was still illumination. Something kept the hot, humid air circulating. Lights flickered around us, and strange glowing runes shimmered in the air, obviously written in the speech of the eldar. Whether they were warnings or exhortations, I could not say.

We came to a halt when we saw the body. It was fresh. For a moment, in my weary, semi-hallucinating state, I feared that it belonged to Grimnar, but it did not. It was the corpse of one of the eldar whose kindred we had so recently fought. It was armed and armoured, and it looked as though its carapace had exploded from the inside.

‘Bolter shell,’ said Macharius. ‘It looks as though the Space Wolf has been this way.’

‘Let us hope he is still alive.’ I glanced around at the ruins. There was no sign of anything moving out there. No sound of anything living. In a human city, I would have expected vermin: cockroaches, rats, sewer-gibbons. Here there was nothing. I had a sense that even when the city was alive there probably weren’t any. My memories of the dream agreed with that, although I had no idea how much faith to place in that recollection.

I had another image in my mind now, of fierce, silent stealthy warfare, of the Space Marine stalking the eldar through the ruins and being stalked in return, of two equally terrifying opponents locked in a struggle to the death. I wondered if we would come across the Space Wolf's tortured and mutilated corpse somewhere along the way. I prayed not, not just for the sake of the Space Marine but because it would be a terrible omen and a portent of our fate.

Ahead of us, the titanic tower rose into the strange sky. We began to move cautiously towards it, aware now of the presence of danger and preparing ourselves for battle.

In my life I have walked through the ruins of many cities, but none were stranger than this nameless place where so many had died so long ago. It was too warm, and I was drugged and weary and the shotgun felt heavy in my hands. Ahead of us lay that huge and ominous starscraper, where it seemed our fates would be resolved.

The wreckage of vehicles lay around us, looking like glittering broken eggshells. I pictured them flying through the air and simply crashing on the day doom had arrived. It was an image reinforced by the way some of them were embedded into the upper reaches of buildings.

I reached down and picked up a shard. It was made of a crystal of some sort. It had broken the way glass breaks, jagged edged and unevenly layered. It felt more like glass than metal. I could not imagine beating it into shape or machining it, the way I had once machined parts in the guild factorums of Belial when I was a lad.

It saved me. By pure random chance, bending over to pick up the piece of crystal lowered my head at exactly the moment the xenos took a shot at me. Something struck the wall behind me. Before I knew what was happening, reflexes developed in two decades of fighting on scores of worlds took over. I threw myself flat and scurried for the nearest cover. I noticed around me others were doing the same.

Force of habit had me looking for Macharius. With uncanny swiftness, he had ducked inside one of the crystalline eggshell remains of a vehicle. I began to wriggle towards him on my belly, keeping down, feeling terribly vulnerable as the realisation of what had happened sunk in.

Someone had shot at me. At me. They would have hit me, too, if I had not

chosen the precise moment they had triggered their weapon to bend down. If I had done it a heartbeat earlier they would have had time to compensate, particularly given what I had seen of the quickness of eldar reflexes. It was possible they were looking at me now, waiting for me to raise my head so they could shoot me.

I had a crawling sensation between my shoulders. I seemed to feel alien eyes glaring at me. I kept moving, not wanting to present a still target, wanting to make sure I was in a position to do my duty if someone attacked Macharius. A shotgun is not a good weapon for a long-range firefight, and for some reason I thought that this was the sort of fight it was going to be.

I heard the faint hum of lasguns discharging as they fired. I heard a loud crack as Anton opened fire with his sniper rifle. I heard nothing else, no screams, no sounds of bodies falling. I still could not bring myself to raise my head from cover and look around. I had a very vivid image of it being reduced to bloody shreds by incoming fire.

I reached the place where Macharius was and glanced around. I could see Drake lying behind a low wall nearby. There was blood on the ground near him, and I wondered whether he had been hit. I raised myself slightly, glanced around and saw nothing except las-bolts flickering at a multitude of hidden targets, and moved over to the inquisitor to see if he needed help. I dropped into position at his side, looked at him. He shook his head.

I could see his hand was bleeding and I noticed a shard of sharp-edged crystal lying near him. He must have cut his hand on it when he took cover. This was a dangerous place to throw yourself down. He was already starting to bandage it. Storm troopers were closing in around him, taking up position to protect him from potential attackers. I sensed a feral hostility behind the visors of their helmets when they looked at me. To them, anyone was a potential threat to their master.

‘Cease fire,’ Macharius shouted, and we obeyed. The shooting stopped. Everyone held their position, though. No one wanted to be the first to stick his head up and potentially have it removed. We waited and nothing happened. I felt my heart beating within my chest. Perhaps the eldar were still out there waiting to shoot. Perhaps they were long gone.

Macharius gave orders. Squads began to shift position, sweeping through the rubble around us, moving systematically to see if they could find the eldar. I held my breath waiting for the sound of screaming that would tell

me they had encountered what they sought.

Nothing came in, save, one by one, reports that the area was clear. I wondered if the eldar had just vanished or were still out there hiding and watching us. Irrationally, I began to feel as if my would-be executioner were waiting for me to stand up again, as if it had somehow singled me out to be its victim. In that spooky place, having narrowly avoided death, weary and buzzed out on the stimm drugs, it seemed all too likely to be the case.

I exchanged looks with Drake. Under his uncanny gaze, I raised myself to one knee and looked around. I hunched my shoulders to make myself a narrower target, and I held the shotgun ready to fire at the slightest sign of movement. As I did so I realised how dangerous the situation was. There were scores of tired, heavily armed men all as nervous as me in the area. All it would take would be one sudden movement, one mistake, and there would be deaths.

Even as that thought occurred to me, Macharius rose into view, weapons held at the ready. He tipped his leonine head to one side as though listening, glanced around casually and emerged from cover with confidence. Just the sight of him doing so was reassuring.

‘Well, now,’ he said. ‘At least we know there are eldar around here. Let’s see what we can do to change that.’

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Men crunched stimm tabs and stood tense and ready. Macharius studied the terrain around the one surviving, untouched tower and gave orders for our approach. All around, the strange ruins loomed out of the darkness: broken buildings, defaced by the worshippers of daemons; broken remnants of temples to xenos gods, looted and defiled by their enemies; shattered stumps of starscrapers that once must have touched the stone skies of this odd place.

Squad by squad, fire team by fire team, we rolled forward, each standing unit prepared to give covering fire to the ones moving around it. We were doing what we had been trained to do, and we were doing it under the eyes of our highest commander. It settled us down in that alien landscape surrounded by alien artefacts. I think it gave us a sense that we still somehow had some control over our own destiny.

Any soldier who has ever been in the chaos of battle will tell you how illusory that sense is, and yet it is important too. It is one of the things that make us human, this need to feel that somehow, in some way, we have some say in what happens to us, some feeling that we may have influence on our destiny.

No matter how illusory that proves to be.

It is both better and worse than I had hoped. The machine of the ancients stands before me. It is still functioning, but it looks as though it has been

warped by the influence of Chaos. This means it may not function in the way it is supposed to, may be twisted to the purposes of She Who Thirsts.

I am faced with a maddening choice: to attempt to use the device and perhaps be destroyed or to turn my back on it and attempt to leave this place through the horde of waiting enemies.

Over the communications channels, I can hear the chatter that tells me how the battle is going. My warriors are selling their lives dearly but, one by one, they are falling to the superior numbers of our bestial enemies. I have not come all this way just to be slain by mon-keigh.

I lay my hands on the control altar and let them flicker over the complex runes of the initiation sequence. Now I will find out if those ancient books lied.

We pushed on deeper into the city, and every step of the way we came under attack. We were fired upon from the balconies overhead by foes who disappeared as swiftly as they attacked. At first we were unsure whether the attacks came from one eldar moving very swiftly or a group of them. It was hard to tell. Fear of the almost invisible foe multiplied their numbers. The advantage lay with them, for they attacked at will and vanished as they pleased, leaving us to count our casualties.

Macharius stood close to Drake, and Drake was surrounded by his bodyguard. They appeared all too willing to throw themselves between the inquisitor and certain death. I stayed as close as I could, and Anton and Ivan likewise. Being within the radius of the inquisitor’s shield seemed like the only slight protection available against our merciless foes.

Macharius frowned now. He was not a man who enjoyed the sensation of being powerless, of waiting for death to come to him, but there was very little he could do. We had the numbers, but our foes refused to meet us on terms where those would do any good.

Another burst of fire struck from balconies and side corners, and by the time anyone could react, the shooters were gone. With their superior reflexes and greater speed and mobility, the xenos were mocking us.

It began to get dark. In places, the ever-burning gemstones of the eldar were dull. Their fire was gone. Either the xenos, with their greater understanding of the working of these things had dimmed them, or the systems were replicating the day/night cycle from before the cataclysm that

had depopulated the city. In either case, the effect was the same. It gave the eldar more places to hide, made them more difficult to spot. The city was full of darkness, and in the darkness the eldar waited.

Sometimes we heard screams behind us, and reports filtered up the chain. They always signified the same thing. A man had gone missing. Always an outlier of the group. His comrades had turned their head for a moment, or he had lagged slightly behind, and the next moment he was gone, spirited away. Moments later the screams would begin. If squads were sent to investigate, the screams receded away from them as though the victim were being carried and tortured at the same time. The screams were the same hideous, pained yells that had haunted us back in the valley, signifiers that the xenos were feasting on human agony. Invariably, the teams sent to investigate would need to be recalled before they drifted out of sight and into the inevitable trap.

Macharius did what he could. Squads moved up to junctions and swept them carefully to make sure they were clear. Other squads moved by. The men were ordered to remain in close formation, not to let anyone get out of sight. Squads were left on overwatch in locations that commanded sweeping views of the surrounding streets. They saw nothing. It was as if the eldar knew where they were and how to avoid them.

In our long, slow progress towards the tower, it felt as though we were going to be picked off one by one and dragged down into a hell of burning nerve ends and torture. I am sure that was on all our minds.

‘I wish the bastards would show themselves,’ said Anton. ‘Then we’d see how long they’d last.’ He slapped the barrel of the sniper rifle meaningfully.

‘They’re working on our nerves,’ I said. ‘Trying to demoralise us and slow us down.’

‘Why would they do that?’ Anton asked.

‘Because they have not found what they are looking for yet, and are trying to keep us away, most likely.’

Macharius tilted his head to one side as if I had just worked out something he had not expected me to be able to. Encouraged, I continued to speak. ‘They know that if we get there, we have the numbers to overpower them and keep them from what they want.’

‘The Fist is in there,’ said Drake, pointing to the tower. It was directly

ahead of us now.

Macharius nodded. We began to move towards the tower, across the plaza surrounding it. The hundred strides across open ground felt like the longest of my life. Every moment, I expected eldar weapons to send death scything my way. It took an effort of will to keep my pace down to that of the squad, and I suspected it was the same way for every man there. It was probably easier for me than many of them since I was with Macharius and Drake and had little option but to stay with them. The others might have been tempted to lengthen their strides and shorten the distance.

The entrance to the tower loomed before us like the gaping maw of a daemon-god, ready to swallow anyone who went in. I could not help but feel that there was something wicked waiting inside for us, that we had been allowed to cross the open ground and enter the building because it was a well-prepared trap.

Nonetheless, I went through the door first, shotgun held ready. I was in a massive atrium, at the centre of which was what appeared to be a fountain. At its heart was something that had once been some sort of water spirit but was now reshaped with crab-like claws and the leering face of a lascivious daemon. Dangling from one of those claws was an eldar. I looked up. Balcony after balcony rose within the atrium. I could see one of those had been shattered, and it looked perfectly possible that the eldar corpse had fallen through it at the break point and dropped into the daemon woman's outstretched claw. Indeed it looked almost deliberate.

'Grimnar has been here,' said Drake. Macharius narrowed his eyes.

'Down!' he roared, throwing himself to one side. A hail of fire slashed through the air where he had stood and took out one of Drake's storm trooper bodyguards. Another of them screamed in agony. The inquisitor stood in the centre of the hail of shots untouched, a nimbus of light playing around him. Prompted by instinct I rolled over to where he stood. A faint tingling flickered across my skin as I entered the globe of his sphere of protection.

Something dropped from a balcony above us. I had just time to catch sight of the eldar. It had a blade in each hand. It had realised that Drake was immune to its ranged weapons and it intended to finish him close-up. It had probably decided, quite correctly under the circumstances, that he was the greatest threat among its enemies.

I raised the shotgun and snapped off a shot at almost point-blank range. The force of the blast sent the eldar bobbing upwards. Most of its weight must have been neutralised by some sort of suspensor system. Either that or the eldar and its armour were both much lighter than they looked. Still, even wounded, the xenos sent one of its blades flashing towards me. Instinctively, I raised the shotgun and the blade clattered off its barrel. The eldar, wounded, was already arching its back and flipping down into a new landing position. It had a pistol of a strange, long-barrelled sort in its hand.

Another shot rang out. Anton fired his sniper rifle. By all rights he should have hit the eldar, but it was no longer where he had aimed. It was somersaulting away, back through one of the entrances to the chamber, too fast for any of us to catch. A storm of las-bolts and pistol fire erupted around it, but it jinked and weaved so swiftly that I would take oath that nothing hit it. By the time we reached the entrance to the chamber into which it had vanished, it was gone.

Three men were already dead. Another two died soon afterwards of their poisoned wounds. From somewhere in the distance we heard what sounded like mocking laughter but might just have been random static generated by a translation engine.

More and more of our men filtered into the building. They stepped around the corpses and glanced warily into the shadows. Like me, they could see now how it was going to be. We would seek the eldar through this haunted building, unsure who was hunter and who was prey.

Suddenly, close by, I heard a distinctive sound: the explosive impact of a bolter shell on armour. I heard a scream that was not human, and from the shadows Grimnar emerged. He looked like hell. His armour was chipped and dented, and the paintwork had flaked away. Fresh blood had splattered on his face and gauntlets and chestplate. None of it belonged to him. In his hand, he held the severed head of a female eldar. His face looked savage and feral and inhuman. His eyes were slitted. His mouth was twisted in a mirthless grin that was terrifying to see, and yet, from his manner, I had the sense that he was enjoying himself, was doing the thing he had been born to do, performing his duties in the service of his Allfather.

‘Well met,’ he said.

‘Well met,’ said Macharius. The Space Wolf lifted the head.

‘This is one of the ones who have been dogging your steps. There is only

one left now.’

So few, I thought. So few of them had pinned down our entire force and caused ten times that number of casualties. It was a terrifying thought. At least there was one less of them now.

‘Where are the rest?’ Macharius asked.

‘In the tower. Their leader is there.’

‘I am surprised you are not,’ said Macharius.

‘They are tough,’ Grimnar said. The tone of his voice was grudging. He did not like making that admission. I realised that the xenos must be truly superhuman for him to describe them in such a way. ‘You are here now. We have a better chance together. Some of us must survive to take back the Fist.’

I could see that too was an admission that went against the grain. In my mind’s eye, I had seen the Space Wolves as snarling, berserker warriors, throwing themselves into battle with a howled war cry and a reckless disregard for their lives. Odd as it may sound I had not expected anything like this realistic tactical assessment. I don’t know why – even astonishingly powerful as they were, Space Marines would not be useful to the Emperor if they were not capable of reading a battlefield.

‘You’ve been inside,’ Macharius said. It was not a question. Grimnar nodded.

‘There is a vault, and around it are a series of chambers laid out in a spiral pattern, like the interior of the shell of a nautilus.’

I had no idea what he meant but clearly Macharius did. His eyes narrowed. His grip tightened on the hilt of his chainsword. ‘Traps? Deadfalls? Ambush sites?’

‘There are many balconies and alcoves, many statues and devices of incomprehensible purpose. There are places where they could lurk and take us by surprise.’

Macharius did not like the sound of that. There would be no room for the subtlety of the complex patterns of manoeuvres he favoured. It was going to be a straight rush into the vault, with the enemy waiting for us. They knew we were coming.

Macharius said, ‘It works to our advantage as well. To stop us the eldar must face our numbers.’

‘I will scout ahead,’ said Grimnar.

We moved into the tower. It was as Grimnar had said. As soon as we passed through the entrance the corridor sloped downwards to the left in a long curve. Almost immediately it widened into another huge chamber. The ceiling above us was curved and the walls of the chamber were the same. I immediately thought of the bowels of a huge beast. It was as if we were being digested by the building and passed through its interior.

There were the same great pools of shadowy darkness as outside, the same dim illumination that seemed to come from nowhere in particular. The walls were marked with glowing eldar runes.

There were fountains and mutated statues and things that might have been altars, although it was difficult to tell. We moved forwards and down, following the interior curve of the building. Once again, I felt the alienness of our surroundings. I had no idea of the purpose of many of the things we saw. I had no idea why the interior was laid out this way. Vague hints rose from the half-remembered memories of my dreams – the shape was geomantic, it affected the flows of mystical energy. Or it had done once. If that were true, surely all these alterations would have affected that. Maybe that's why the lights were dimmer and the place had a strange, fusty atmosphere.

I entered the vault through the doorway and immediately had a sensation of falling. I felt dizzy, and I struggled to understand the reality of my surroundings. It was as if we were emerging from a trapdoor in the floor of the chamber, which was a vast sphere. Gravity seemed to twist through ninety degrees and the walls of the chamber into which we had emerged became the floor. After the brief sensation of falling, I stood upright, dizzy and nauseous, and flexed my knees as I struggled to regain my balance. I walked a little and followed the curve of the floor. I had to fight down the crazed feeling that if I kept walking I would describe a complete circle around the wall of the chamber and return to my starting point, even though that would involve traversing what was currently the ceiling far, far above my head.

Overhead was a dome of translucent stone, through which was visible the shimmering, multicoloured lights of whatever lay beyond this sub-realm of reality. A wisp of light played in the air. It swirled like water in a whirlpool and appeared to drain away even as it spun. We were in a space where the

laws of gravity appeared to have been suspended, where cables of crystal, glimmering with light and shadows, rose from each wall towards a central point. Not only that, lateral cables ran amid them, forming a lattice, a web of light and shadow and colour. I reached out and touched one of the cables, and my hand tingled. It was not an unpleasant sensation, a mild shock that made the hair on my head and neck lift. Looking up along it I could see a humanoid figure, a long way above us, climbing along the cables towards a distant point, which would most likely be the central spot in the chamber.

Macharius had already begun to climb, Drake as well. Grimnar was moving ahead of us. I looked around and saw Anton and Ivan. We looked at each other, slung our weapons over our shoulders and started to climb using both hands to pull ourselves up.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I reach out through the device and I touch infinity. I feel the pulse of creation around me. I sense the flow of cosmic energy. Beyond that I sense something else, the infinite power of Chaos in that universe that runs conterminous with ours. I feel my mind start to buckle under the pressure of the inputs.

This is not how the machine was supposed to work. Or was it? It was intended to make thoughts and dreams real. How does it do that? I begin to concentrate, to fight back against the waves of pleasure and pain that pulse through my brain. I begin to imagine the shape of reality changing around me, responding to my will. I begin to understand what I have found.

This whole sub-universe is malleable. All of the matter here can be, and has been, changed. I visualise the streets of Commorragh, and they coalesce around me. I picture Sileria writhing naked, and she dances before me in her skin. There is a ghastly, ghostly quality to this, of the not quite real of illusion, but I know that if only I concentrate hard enough, what I wish will take shape. I see what those long gone eldar were working on before they were devoured. They were trying to tap the forbidden power of Chaos to allow them to reshape reality. And they succeeded. Although their success may have contributed to their downfall.

I know that if I work on this I can summon armies to my aid, armies that will worship me like a god, which will allow me to raise myself to heights undreamed of by the inferior intellects around me. I hear the whispered

temptations of absolute power and I do not resist them. Who would?

We swarmed up the web of pulsing light towards the strangeness at its centre. Ahead of me I could see Macharius and Drake and Grimnar. The Space Wolf moved with an inhuman speed and grace that no mortal man could match, although Macharius was close. When Grimnar reached the pattern in the centre of the web, he vanished, simply shimmered out as if he had never been. I wondered where he had gone. Macharius paused for a moment then followed. Drake went next. I reached the portal and paused, drawing breath, suddenly very afraid.

It was another gateway, opening into I knew not where. It was not going to be good, I was sure. I felt my heart pounding against my ribs, a small frightened animal pounding against the bars of its cage. In the end it was sheer momentum that decided me. The need to follow Macharius and not remain behind, waiting for who knew what, perhaps for the xenos to return and torture me. Offering up a prayer to the Emperor, I threw myself through the portal and into a world of strangeness.

At first, it was as if I had stepped through into formless nothingness. All around me was only swirling, multicoloured mists of the sort that had been visible through the walls to either side of the roadway we had walked. I wondered if we had passed through some sort of final barrier and into what lay beyond the cosmic structure the xenos had built. Ahead of me, floating, were the others. Ahead of them, in the distance, was a glowing platform. I could see a small figure moving towards it. I tried to move myself but nothing happened. It was like trying to swim in a medium that had no resistance. I could move my limbs but there was nothing for them to gain traction against. I writhed and twisted my body but my wriggling could not move me from the spot.

I noticed my surroundings were starting to change, that the clouds of floating colours were taking on shape and density. I ignored them and drifted through the ether towards our distant goal. I could see it now. There was an altar. It glowed with holy light, a transcendental energy. Near it stood one of the xenos, the tallest and most powerful looking I had yet seen. It carried itself with an aura of utter confidence, and the glance it directed at us held only the purest contempt. In such a way a man might contemplate an insect he was going to squash.

Even as I felt the chilling gaze pass over me, I noticed that the clouds of formless matter were taking on a new shape. They were becoming more solid, acquiring the look of the ruined city we had seen outside or something much worse, an almost infinitely large fortress of xenos build stretching as far as the eye could see. From each building peered out a hundred xenos faces. I wondered what had happened. Was this some sort of transportation device? Had we suddenly been shifted through space and time to some new alien realm? Were we about to be overwhelmed by legions of eldar desperate to rend our flesh and feast on our agony?

The air shimmered, and more and more of the xenos came into being. How had they achieved this? I had heard of teleportation devices but never of them being used on so vast a scale.

The whole thing had the aspect of a dream. If this were a portal to some distant realm we were not all the way through it yet; reality had not yet twisted all the way. Drake seemed to be shouting something at Macharius. Grimnar ignored him and moved towards the xenos. A score of the newly materialised eldar threw themselves in the way. Grimnar's chainsword flickered out and rent through them.

At first they came apart like ghosts, as if their flesh were nothing more than mist. The Space Marine moved forward, chopping through them, and as he did so they became progressively more solid. Not only that, more and more of them kept appearing, out of nowhere. For every one he cut down, two more materialised. They moved swiftly, with eerie grace, fast enough to match even his superhumanly swift movements. The tide of the combat turned. Grimnar found himself on the defensive, beaten back till he stood beside Macharius and Drake. A hail of fire from the warriors mowed down the eldar, and for a moment things seemed stable.

I paused to look around. Gigantic, dark crystalline structures had somehow swung into place all around me, unfolding out of nothingness until they loomed overhead like the castle of some childhood ogre. Again I was struck by the dreamlike quality of all of this. It could not be real. And yet when I reached out my hand, I felt smooth, cool stone beneath it. When I glanced around, I saw hundreds upon hundreds of eldar infantry moving towards me. I knew the moment of my death had arrived. There were far too many of them to be resisted. Still there was something not quite right. The eldar's armour did not have all the details I expected, the hieroglyphs that marked

rank or status or role or function, whatever it was they did. The xenos's movements while graceful were repetitive and similar. They all appeared to move in perfect synchronisation.

I clutched the shotgun tighter and noticed there was ground beneath my feet. It was dark and shimmering like the structures around me, and although crystalline it was not slippery but seemed to have been designed to allow traction. I began to move towards the conflict. There was not really anything else to do. I could remain on my own in the strange city taking shape around me, but that would have meant soon being surrounded by hordes of murderous xenos. I saw Anton and Ivan close by. They looked just as lost and confused as I felt, but they were doing what they could always be relied on to do when in trouble. They were following me. The Undertaker was there and various members of Macharius's Lion Guard, too.

More and more units of xenos were coming into view. There were thousands of them and only a comparative handful of us. I knew the time was fast approaching when I was going to have to sell my life as dearly as possible.

Drake seemed to be trying to explain something to the others and I could not work out what he was saying. I found a low barrier wall to use as cover, took up a position behind it and looked at the oncoming horde. Incoming fire whined around my head. I popped up and opened fire, hitting one of the oncoming xenos at almost point-blank range.

I sense the approach of others. Foolish flies have entered the web woven by my godlike consciousness. I will devour them now. I begin to spin a new reality from dreams and visions, summoning a world into being around me, creating legions of lost souls to serve me.

This time I will destroy my foes.

Anton looked at me. He frowned his puzzlement and popped up and aimed a shot. More eldar raced towards us. Our surroundings continued to change as well. They were more solid, more real than they had been even a few moments ago.

I shook my head, wondering whether I was going mad, whether too much fatigue and too much stimm were affecting my brain. I wriggled along on my belly towards where Macharius and Drake were. Grimnar stood watch

with them. A massive explosion ripped the ground, throwing us apart. I fell to land beside the Space Wolf. Somehow he had managed to keep his feet. Where the others had been was only a tangle of broken crystal and strange flickering lines. Hails of fire from the eldar splintered the wreckage around us. I lay prone and still for a moment.

Looking up into Grimnar's face, I noticed that his eyes were yellowish, like those of a dog.

'What is happening?' I shouted over the roar of the carnage around us.

'The reality here is mutable. It responds to a sufficiently strong will. The foes we face have been conjured by the eldar.'

I thought about what I was seeing. The way reality continued to swim and shift. An enormous tower collapsed under the impact of an artillery barrage. A plume of dust rose up as if to touch the sky.

'It looks so real,' I said.

'It is real,' said Grimnar. 'In this place, it is real.'

A look almost of dismay flickered across his face. I tried to imagine what all of this strangeness must be like to him. His senses were keener than mine. He could see things I could not, hear them and smell them as well. It could not be pleasant to have the very forms of reality dance and transform before him.

He shook his head and growled, and seemed like his fierce, determined self once more. 'What can we do?' I said.

'I will seek the Fist of Russ,' he said. 'It is out there in all this Chaos.'

Without another word he threw himself over the wall, rolled to his feet, chopped down some eldar soldiers and ran off. I saw the others moving into place to guard Macharius. I doubted that one more soldier would make any difference, so prompted by some inner daemon, I followed along in the wake of the Space Wolf. I was not sure why. If Grimnar could not handle what he met out here, I was not sure I could make any difference. I went anyway.

I raced across a landscape torn by war, chaotic beyond belief, twisted by a kind of madness that was all but incomprehensible. Overhead loomed a city built by maddened eldar. It shimmered and bent and moved as if part of the flickering imagination of a demented god.

I dived into a trench as wide as the tracks of a Baneblade and wriggled along in the direction Grimnar had gone. I could hear the distinctive sound

of a bolter being fired and knew I was on the right track still.

I popped my head up and saw the Space Wolf hacking his way through a group of eldar warriors. Limbs flew trailing droplets of blood. A spine, partially severed, unwound through a broken backplate of crystalline armour. A xenos leapt behind the Space Marine. I raised and fired the shotgun. The shell took it in the back at the same time as Grimnar's bolter butt smashed into its helmet, crushing it. I sensed the Space Wolf's eyes on me, then he turned and moved on. I wondered whether it was my imagination or whether he was moving fractionally more slowly to enable me to keep up.

He paused occasionally to sniff the air, then moved swiftly and surely onwards, always moving as though towards a goal. I followed, trusting to the idea that he knew what he was doing. He entered a long hall and moved through it. An eldar dropped down on him, somehow moving faster and with more skill than the others he had faced so far. The two of them exchanged blows so swiftly it was impossible for me to follow. I ran up, not wanting to get too close to the eldar but wanting to be close enough to shoot if the opportunity arose.

The eldar rained down blows on Grimnar. He parried with the barrel of his bolter. Sparks flew where the two weapons connected. The eldar was the swifter of the two. Its blows made it through Grimnar's guard and chipped his armour. Suddenly Grimnar let go his bolter; it dropped still attached to his neck by the strap. He reached out with both hands, grasped the eldar's head and twisted. The xenos's neck snapped even as its weapons drove into Grimnar's side.

The Space Marine stood there, mouth open, gasping like a wolf on a hot day. I could see he was reeling on his feet, jaw muscles working as though he were in great pain. I ran up to him. His eyes had a glazed look, were focused into the distance as if he could see something astonishing a long way off. Slowly, his sight came back into focus, his breathing slowed and he became steadier on his feet. It was as though he had been poisoned and then his body had slowly adapted to the toxin, leaving him immune to its effects. Without a word he strolled on.

I recognised where we were. It was an almost exact replica of the atrium of the tower we had passed through to get here, a mirror within a mirror. In the centre of the chamber was an altar and on that altar was a gauntlet. Beside it

stood a tall, powerful looking xenos.

The Space Wolf raised his bolter and took swift aim at the eldar's head. The air between them shimmered and suddenly more eldar warriors were there. The head of one of them exploded. I realised the enemy commander had brought them into being to stop us. All of them looked exactly the same, and exactly like the figure we had seen by the altar. Grimnar did not hesitate for a moment. He sprang into action, blasting and smashing a path towards the altar, killing as he went. I lobbed a grenade into the mass of xenos, as far from the Space Marine as I could get it. The shockwave pulsed through them, throwing broken figures doll-like across the chamber.

I glanced back and saw Grimnar wrestling with a group of xenos. They had swarmed over him with their uncanny swiftness and were cutting and slashing at him with no regard to their own lives. They seemed utterly and maniacally fearless. Potent though the Space Wolf was, no single being, save perhaps the Emperor himself, could have withstood such an assault. His bolter was wrenched from his hands, and blow after blow rained down on his armoured form. Twist as he might some of them got through, and he fell amid a mass of his alien enemies.

Panic surged through me. I cursed myself for ever following Grimnar. If a Space Marine could go down here what chance did I have to survive? Desperately, I tried to recall where we had first seen the eldar leader. I primed a grenade and threw it at the spot, just as every alien head turned to look at me. The grenade burst in the air, sending a wave of shock and shrapnel tearing through the enemy ranks. The effect was startling. The massed ranks of eldar grew insubstantial and vanished, leaving only one, reeling in the middle next to the altar. I do not know why.

No! The link with the reality engine is broken. It will take too long to restore it. My legions have vanished. My foes close in. I look up, dazed and nauseous, and I see the human responsible. Of one thing I am certain. On him I will have my vengeance.

The sounds of conflict outside fell suddenly silent. A terrible hush filled the air, the sort of quiet you would expect to hear a heartbeat before the end of the world erupted. I wondered what I had done. The only explanation that occurred to me was that the grenade blast had shattered the xenos's

concentration, making it impossible to maintain the armies it had summoned in this strange place. I raised the shotgun to my shoulder, aimed directly at the body and pulled the trigger.

The eldar sprang, moving above the blast with one easy, fluid movement. It seemed to be moving more slowly than previously, and it came to me that perhaps it was wounded, or perhaps the disconnection from whatever had allowed it to summon armies had done something to its brain. Nonetheless, I knew it would be more than a match for me if it got within striking distance.

I kept firing, hoping to distract it and prevent it from summoning more eldar to its aid. It came ever closer, holding its blade at the ready. Strange mechanical laughter spilled from the headpiece of its armour.

'I shall feast on your agony, mortal,' it said.

The eldar moved towards me so fast I barely had time to raise the shotgun. It made no difference. A fist blurred past it and hit me somewhere over the heart. It was like a blow from a sledgehammer. I felt as though I could be catapulted backwards, but something restrained me: the arm of the xenos, it was holding me in place. I heard something click and blades extruded from its gloves. I flinched as I felt cloth and flesh tear. A flap of skin lifted from my back as it was flayed by multiple scalpels. A searing heat flared around the wound. Briefly, I wondered whether it was shock or poison, and then realised it did not matter. I tried to pull myself free but the xenos held me in place. At first skin and flesh ripped in response to my movement, but then the alien moved to compensate.

I let the shotgun fall forward and I pulled the trigger. The blast came at an odd angle. The kick broke my wrist. Somehow the eldar swayed backwards and away, but it had been forced to let me go. The blades came clear of my flesh with an odd sucking sound. I gritted my teeth and forced myself to move. I heard that flat, machine-generated laughter behind me.

Something blurred overhead. The eldar was now in front of me as I tried to scramble away. It had somersaulted over me. It held up its gauntlet. I saw my blood on the scalpel blades emerging from its fingertips. It mingled with gobbets of pink stuff which had been attached to my innards not a few moments before. I reached for a grenade left handed. I thought if I could arm it, I could simply hold it and let the explosion get both of us. I knew I was a dead man and that given the slightest opportunity the eldar would

torture me. At any moment I expected to feel the nerve-searing pain of neurotoxins anyway. A quick death seemed preferable to that.

The eldar reached out and batted the grenade away. The action was casual and contemptuous. Behind it, I saw something that made me laugh. It paused for a moment.

Macharius stood there, pistol raised, aiming. He pulled the trigger. The eldar was already in motion, diving to one side. The shell took it in the shoulder and sent it reeling. It rolled over, regaining its feet, twisting to bring its own long-barrelled weapon to bear. Macharius shot again, caught the eldar in the chest. Macharius pulled the trigger again. The shell exploded within the chest cavity exposed by the power of the previous shot. Macharius kept firing shell after shell until his magazine was emptied. Clearly he was taking no chances.

I mumbled my thanks, and then I noticed Macharius's face, and how strange his expression was. Something about it reminded me of the Undertaker. His features held the look of a man who had seen too much. He stood there for a long time, looking at the dead eldar. Drake entered and behind him came Anton and Ivan and the Undertaker, along with a few surviving Lion Guard.

My old comrades raced over and began to treat my wounds. They slapped synthi-flesh on the ripped skin and applied adhesive bandages. 'Go look at Grimnar.' I barely managed to force the words out from between my mangled lips.

Grimnar had already started to rise. His awesome powers of recovery were starting to assert themselves. He was functional again despite having taken a beating that would have killed a normal man. Together he and Macharius and Drake moved towards the altar on which lay the Fist of Russ.

I limped along behind them, determined to witness what came next. I had come a long way and I was not going to miss out on it now.

All three of them stood at the altar looking down on the ancient relic. It was indeed a gauntlet, and it looked like it had been made to fit Space Marine armour. If anything it was bigger than Grimnar's. It had similar runes inscribed on it too.

I saw Grimnar and Drake and Macharius exchange looks.

'This is not the Fist of Russ,' said Grimnar. 'It is ancient and it belonged to

the Wolves, but not to our primarch.’

‘But…’ I heard Anton say. All three of those deadly men looked at him, and even he had the wit to fall silent.

‘I will see that this is properly disposed of,’ said Grimnar, picking up the Fist.

All looked bleak, their faces frozen as if their features had been carved from immutable rock.

‘We are done here,’ said Macharius. ‘There is nothing for us.’

His voice had an odd quality to it, the sound of massive boulders grinding together within the cold ice of a glacier. ‘Let us go,’ he said.

With the Space Wolf loping along ahead of us, we departed.

We emerged from the portal. It had taken us what seemed like days to march to it, but when we stepped back into the Valley of the Ancients, it looked like only minutes had passed. The officer set to watch it looked up and blinked in amazement. ‘Sir,’ he said, ‘we did not expect you back so soon.’

His eyes ran over us again, and I could see he was adding up the discrepancies between our appearance and what he had expected to see. We were unshaven, our uniforms were torn, we were red-eyed from marching on stimms; some were wounded, including myself. Many casualties would not be returning at all.

‘Show me your chronometer,’ Macharius said. The officer complied. Macharius shook his head. ‘Sixteen minutes,’ he said to Drake. ‘We’ve been gone sixteen minutes.’

Drake looked haunted, as he had done ever since we saw the Fist of Demetrius. He nodded as though Macharius had simply confirmed what he had suspected. ‘At least we made it out,’ he said.

Macharius nodded grimly. ‘And it means I have returned in time to ensure the slaughter of the xenos.’

He began to speak into the comm-net with rasping authority, getting reports as to how the situation stood, then rapping out orders for dealing with remnants of the eldar attack. As he did so he kept walking, and we kept moving with him, emerging from the labyrinthine temple into a night scarred by the blaze of battle.

Macharius launched himself into the conflict with the zeal and fury of a

true servant of the Emperor. We strode by his side, weapons blazing, striving as always to keep him from harm.

OceanofPDF.com

FALL OF MACHARIUS

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ONE

Exhibit 107D-5J. Transcription from a speech imprint found in the rubble of Bunker 207, Hamel's Tower, Kaladon, containing information pertaining to the proposed canonisation of Lord High Commander Solar Macharius and to the investigation of former High Inquisitor Heironymous Drake for heresy and treason against the Imperium.

Walk in the Emperor's Light.

The gigantic face of the skull moon leered down through the clouds. The screams of the dying echoed out of no-man's-land. Strangely coloured mist drifted over the lip of the trench and little lights, like the glow of lost fireflies, swirled inside as it passed overhead. There was something sinister about the movement, as if the tendril of poisonous gas were the limb of a monster furtively seeking out prey.

Shadows danced away from the entrance of the nearest bunker, where some of the troops were toasting lasgun powerpacks in a rubbish fire, hoping to coax a last bit of life into them before the next enemy attack. A partially disassembled flamer lay just inside the doorway. It had an abandoned look to it that did not surprise me. We had not had a sniff of promethium in more than two months and without that fiery element the weapon was worthless. The bunker itself was the shattered remnant of a Leman Russ battle tank, tipped on its side by a direct hit from enemy

artillery and partially buried in mud. It had been stripped of any useful parts by the enginseers and its carcass left to decompose. Hundreds of such wrecks were incorporated into the trench lines. It made me nostalgic for the heady initial days of the war when we still believed in the armoured fist of the Imperial Guard, before everything got bogged down in the mud and rain and slurry of this hideous world.

I checked my spare rebreathers for the hundredth time. I had built up quite a collection – every man in Macharius's Imperial Guard army had been issued with a secondary before we arrived on Loki and I had helped myself to a few more from corpses since then. I prayed to the Emperor that they would bring me more luck than they had to their original owners. There had been a lot of filter failures. There had been a lot of failures of every kind.

On Loki, you could never have too many protective masks. You never knew when one might fail, and if that happened you were dead. If the poison gases did not give you a heart attack by showing you your worst fears, the disease spores would clot in your lungs, and if the disease spores didn't choke you to death on your own mucus then the airborne moulds would fill the inside of your lungs with grey fur. There were at least a dozen unpleasant ways to die on Loki that did not involve being shot, bayoneted or otherwise slain by heretics and there were plenty of fanatical bloodthirsty unbelievers to go around, too. The planet seemed to have entered into a conspiracy with the forces of darkness to slay the Emperor's soldiers. I've been on many such since I joined the Guard.

Anton rose up out of the gloom, tall and gangly and weather-beaten. The rebreather covered the lower half of his face but from the way the old scar across his forehead writhed I could tell he was grinning at me. That he was still capable of such idle good humour after all these years of campaigning was testimony to his innate cheerfulness. Or his innate stupidity. It was sometimes hard to say. 'You counting your treasures, are you?'

He was respectful enough when there were others around, but with no troops about we stopped being sergeant and corporal and were just men who had fought and bled for each other over the three decades since we had left Belial.

Anton had not even bothered to maintain his secondary rebreather. He was careless that way, or counting on me to bail him out most likely. He walked a little along the wooden duckboard. A thin layer of mud sucked at his

boots. The sound seemed to disturb him, so he stopped walking for a moment and studied the muck thoughtfully.

‘Somebody has to make sure there’s enough to go round,’ I said. ‘You never know when another gas attack will come.’

‘I don’t know why they bother,’ Anton said. He looked out into no-man’s-land and shook his head at the folly of the generals. ‘We all have rebreathers, don’t we?’

Like me, Anton had grown up on Belial, an industrial hive. Wearing rebreathers was second nature to us, but it wasn’t to everybody. Many of the newcomers had come from agri worlds and feral worlds and the sort of beautiful friendly places where the air was always breathable. Hard to imagine but true.

‘We all have them and we sometimes wear them,’ I said. ‘And they sometimes work. The enemy is playing the odds. And anyway, you are missing the point. The gas is not there to kill us, it’s just to add to the general level of misery.’

‘I heard a medical adept say that you don’t need to breathe in some of the gases,’ said Ivan, rubbing at the metal-covered half of his face and then running the artificial fingers of his bionic hand over his prosthetic jaw. ‘They just need to touch your skin. That’s why we’re supposed to stay covered up all the time.’

‘Genius,’ said Anton. ‘Make sure we all get trench foot and lice and shuttle-bugs. I think Leo has it right. They are adding to the misery. I mean, this is the Imperial Guard – misery is what it’s all about.’

Somewhere out in the vast field of mud, barbed wire, shell-holes and disease-filled sewage ponds, a man was begging for someone to come and kill him. From the accent I could tell he was one of ours, a Grosslander by the sound of it. I wondered what it was that made him plead so convincingly. Was he suffering the after-effects of some hallucinogenic? Was one of the giant rats that haunted the trench complex chewing on his leg? Or did he have his own personal reason for seeking a quick way out of Loki’s killing grounds?

‘One moment,’ Anton said. He lifted the silenced sniper rifle he had picked up on Dolmen, popped his head above the parapet and scanned the horizon for a moment. There was a soft coughing sound and the begging stopped. Anton dropped back into the trench and said, ‘Mission

accomplished.’

‘You shot him,’ I said. ‘You shot one of our own men.’

‘I gave him what he was asking for. And to tell the truth he was getting on my nerves.’

‘You get on my nerves all the time,’ said Ivan. Even after all these years and an ever-improving series of prosthetic jaws, he still mangled his words. The plasteel teeth did not improve his pronunciation any. ‘Does that mean I can shoot you?’

‘The guy had lost half his guts. His entrails were covered in ghost mould. I tell you, if the same thing happens to me I hope you will shoot me. You’ll be doing me a favour.’

‘I’d be doing the rest of us a favour if I shot you now.’

‘Ha-bloody-ha,’ Anton said.

‘See anything else while you were up there?’ I asked. ‘You’re lucky one of the heretic snipers didn’t take your fool head off. They’re just waiting for an opportunity.’

‘I killed the last one two days ago when he shot Lieutenant Jensen. That will teach him not to do it again.’

‘Ever heard of reinforcements?’ I asked. ‘It’s not unknown for new snipers to be sent to the sector to replace the ones who were killed.’

Anton scratched at his head, running his fingernails across the ceramite of his helmet with a slick, scratchy sound – a pantomime of idiocy. ‘Reinforcements? Reinforcements? I heard that word once, a long time ago. Aren’t they the things the High Command keeps promising to send us, along with more ammo, and more food and new uniforms, and then keeps forgetting about? Or am I confusing them with supplies? It’s been almost two standard years in this forsaken place. I’m starting to forget the meaning of words.’

Dumb as he was, he had a point. We *had* been stuck here on Loki for close on two standard Imperial years now. It was the longest campaign of any during the crusade and there was still no end in sight. Things had got so bad that even elements of Macharius’s elite personal guard, like us, had been thrown piecemeal onto the front line to reinforce the green troops there. It was how we had gone from occupying a nice suite in a commandeered palace in Niflgard City to squatting in tattered, dirt-encrusted uniforms in these mud-filled trenches, watching assorted moulds grow on our feet and

limbs. Most of the commissars had got themselves killed in the endless slogging grind of this war. Those who had not were doing the work of ten, walking the lines, executing the cowardly and those too wounded for medical treatment.

'We'll get reinforced soon. When have you ever known Macharius to fail?' Ivan said. He sounded more like he was praying for it to be true than making a statement in which he believed. None of us had ever known a campaign in which Macharius had taken a personal interest bogged down for so long. Maybe it was true what all the rookies were saying, that his fabled luck had deserted him. Or perhaps it was simpler than that. Perhaps, like the rest of us, in spite of all the juvenat treatments, he was simply getting old.

'He's never fought anyone like Richter before,' Anton said. 'Some say the traitor is as good as the Lord High Commander was in his glory days.' He paused to let that particularly gloomy thought sink in. Anton did not like the fact that the enemy commander here on Loki had been one of our own, a favoured protégé of Macharius and his best pupil, until the day he had decided to start building his own little private empire here on the galaxy's bleak far edge.

'But you don't agree with them, of course,' I said. Saying a thing like that was dangerously close to treason. I had heard it muttered, though, even by soldiers of the Lion Guard, Macharius's personal bodyguard. There was a sense of shock to the whole thing. Some of us had known Richter – we had fought alongside him and his regiment for almost a decade. And then one day, he had just turned, gone native, turned against us here on this hell world. What was most alarming was the thought that if it could happen to him, seemingly Macharius's heir apparent, who else could it happen to?

'Of course I don't,' said Anton. 'What kind of idiot do you take me for?'

A lock of hair poked out from beneath his helmet. It was greying now. The stubble on my own chin was grey too. Juvenat holds back the years but it cannot stop them rolling by. It merely slows down the effects on your body and, some say, it has other side effects. Everything has its price and extended life has the highest price of all. I felt tired sometimes when I should not.

'I don't doubt we'll see reinforcements,' said Anton, suddenly serious. All of his life he had the greatest faith in Macharius and even if he sometimes

complained he never liked to leave that faith in doubt for any length of time. ‘I just worry about the quality.’

He did not quite bellow it. He was trying in his way to be tactful, but with all of us he shared the veteran’s contempt for the newcomers. That too, like old age, is something that sneaks up on you. It did not matter how often I told myself that we had all been as green as these newcomers once, that the only way soldiers got to be veterans was starting as neophytes and living long enough to learn.

I could not suppress a certain irritation any more at the fresh young faces around me in the trenches and bunkers. I was glad none of them had decided to join us for a smoke in the rain. I could barely hide the contempt I felt for the way they did not have sense enough to throw themselves flat at the first hint of incoming shells and at the way they cowered in cover too long afterwards.

They did not move to the same beat as those of us who had been on the front line for so long. You were always having to wait for them to catch up, and then having to tell them at other times not to rush ahead and get themselves killed. I could see some of the Grosslanders looking at us now, heads poking out round the improvised door-holes of their bunkers, unlined faces staring out with scared and trusting eyes.

Or maybe it was just that they were young in a way I was not, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. Maybe I was just jealous.

The smaller moon jumped over the horizon and raced across the sky like a drunken charioteer. Its orbit was much lower and faster than its huge brother, more like a comet or a meteor than a satellite. It was visible through the gaps in the clouds as it careened across the sky above us.

A trench rat emerged from its hole and glared at us with its horrible intelligent eyes. It chittered something to its hidden companions and retreated before anyone could draw a bead on it. It had seen no corpses to scavenge, no unguarded food, so why take the risk?

‘Sensible beast,’ said Ivan.

‘I hate those scuttling little frakkers,’ Anton said. ‘Caught a bunch chewing on Nardile’s corpse last night. They’d pulled out his guts and scooped out his eyes. One of them was nibbling on an eyeball like it was a grape.’ We all licked our lips at the thought of grapes, even Ivan who only has metal and plastic lips.

‘What did you do?’ I asked.

‘I armed an incendiary grenade and rolled it in among them. One of them tried to eat it too, greedy little swine. Then one of his mates tried to throw it back at me, I swear. He knew what it was for.’

‘Did it get you?’ I stifled a mock yawn.

‘Would I be sitting here telling you about it, if it had?’ Anton said.

‘I’m not sure I want to be sitting close to a genius who uses incendiaries in his own trenches and can almost be outsmarted by a rat.’

‘The key word is *almost*,’ said Anton. He sounded almost proud.

Behind him the chanting of the heretics had picked up again. I felt the hair on the back of my neck start to rise. For all I knew it might just be their evening prayers, but I doubted it. It was normally a sign that they were getting ready to attack. Or rather that their priests were whipping them up for an offensive. There was something about that mushy language that set my nerves on edge. It was as if the speakers’ mouths were filling with phlegm as they chanted – the mere sound of the words suggested illness and disease.

Anton was on his feet. He cupped his hands over his mouth and bellowed, ‘Could you keep the noise down? We’re trying to have a cosy little chat over here.’

By pure chance there was a momentary silence from the distant trenches. ‘Thank you,’ Anton bellowed.

The chanting started again.

‘I swear they do that just to annoy me,’ Anton said.

‘Yes,’ Ivan said. ‘This war is all about you. Always was. Always will be.’

‘I’m tempted to take a few of the new boys, head down the line to the Great Bog and make my displeasure known,’ Anton said. About a kilometre away, our trench system blended near imperceptibly into their trench system. If you followed the so-called Grand Trunk Road you’d get there, provided you negotiated the sprawl of barbed wire, trip-mines, booby traps, mud-holes, spore pits and rats’ nests that made movement in the abandoned trenches so treacherous. The Great Bog was a hideous swamp of latrines, cesspits and abandoned emplacements constantly fought over. Right now it represented our front line. Tomorrow it might well belong to the heretics.

‘You know the rules,’ I said. ‘We stay here until we are told to do something different. Or until the heretics come and ask us to leave. We

don’t need to go embarking on any of your wild little adventures.’

‘You used to be a lot more fun before you became a sergeant, Leo,’ Anton said. ‘There was a time when you would have been leading the charge, not sitting there moaning about it.’

‘I think you are confusing me with someone else,’ I said. ‘Someone idiotic. Yourself perhaps.’ I could not think of any time when I would have been keen on one of Anton’s madcap charges, not even when we were young and had first joined the Guard all those decades ago.

‘If I am so stupid, how come I am still alive?’ he asked.

It was a good question, but it prompted an easy response. ‘Because Ivan and I are here to pull your nads out of the fire before you can toast them.’

‘I can think of plenty of times when I have saved the both of you.’ It was true, too, but the first rule of arguing with Anton is never to admit that he might have a point. You could go mad if you did that.

‘You can also remember seeing little green daemons dancing out in no-man’s-land,’ I said. During the last attack, there had been a fault in the filter in his rebreather. He was lucky I had dragged him into the bunker before it became something a lot worse than a mild case of seeing things.

‘They could have been there,’ Anton said. He sounded thoughtful now. ‘You hear a lot of strange stories here on Loki.’

‘We’ve been hearing a lot of strange stories since we got to the Halo Worlds,’ said Ivan. ‘It does not mean they are true. I mean ghosts of old armies from the Emperor’s time. The dead coming back to life. Space Marines dedicated to the powers of Chaos. Who could believe any of that?’

The chanting in the distance had become a phlegmy roar. Drums beat amidst it, erratically, like the heart of a fever victim in the throes of a muscular spasm. There was a suggestion of the catechism to it now, of a priest calling a question and a congregation shouting a response. Perhaps it was just my imagination. Now and then I seemed to be able to pick out an occasional word. Sound moved strangely through the trench system. Idly I wondered if any of Richter’s former regiment were over there, some of our old comrades. I had killed one a few months back, a sergeant I had once got drunk with back on Morgan’s World. He had been dressed in muddy brown robes, pale of face and tattooed with evil runes. I did not like to think about why a veteran of the crusade might have done that.

A light rain started to fall, a cold drizzle that soaked the threadbare fabric

of our green tunics, ran down the rebreather goggles, hampering vision. I ran my forearm over the lenses to wipe them and they cleared for a few moments before becoming obscured again. I watched the puddles ripple where the raindrops hit them. The scummy water had a sinister chemical tint to it, the light refracted into rainbows the colours of which were not found anywhere in nature.

‘Ah, the rain,’ said Anton. ‘Just what I needed to make my joy complete.’ He pulled the standard-issue overcoat tight around his narrow shoulders, hunched forward with his collar up. He looked over at the bunker door without enthusiasm. It was a choice between returning to that narrow confined space with the rest of the troops or sitting outside in the rain. Neither was particularly appealing.

I picked up the periscope and raised it over the lip of the trench, adjusting the magnification. I could see kilometres and kilometres of earthworks, stretching all the way to the distant mountains. I twisted it and saw the same in every direction. An endless maze of trenches through which two armies slaughtered each other, all caught between gigantic ranges of mountains in which there were more fortified cities. One day, far in the future, the goal was to push all the way into those armoured citadels. Then we would be swapping fighting in trenches for fighting in tunnels. At that moment I would have welcomed it as a relief from the monotony.

The periscope went dark. I looked up. Idiot Anton was standing on the parapet again covering the lens with his gloved hand.

‘There’s a reason for using this thing,’ I said. I might just have sounded a little testy.

‘I told you I already killed the heretic snipers,’ Anton said.

‘Take your hand off the lens,’ I said. ‘I thought I saw something.’

I hadn’t really, but I wanted to annoy him. He shaded his eyes with his hand, looked off into the distance and said, ‘Hell, you’re right!’

I squinted into the eyepiece and adjusted the focus, trying to work out whether he was having me on or not. It was difficult to tell in the half-light of the moon with the mist and residue gas clouds floating above the shell-churned earth. Then I saw what looked like a tide of shadows, moving across the muddy fields of no-man’s-land, gliding from shell-hole to shell-hole, moving smoothly and quickly on a course that would take them to our lines just north-east of where we were. I coughed.

‘What is it?’ Ivan asked. He grabbed the periscope, wanting to take a look himself.

‘Death commando by the look of it. Looks like they’re going for another night raid.’

Ivan reached over and squeezed the bulb of the air-horn. It was a primitive thing but we had been reduced to such devices in the mud of Loki. Something about the planet radiation halo interfered with the comm-net, which worked only intermittently. The omnipresent mould and mud were tough on equipment as well. The horn’s great bellow echoed through the trench and bunkers and was answered by the sound of other air-horns as the alarm spread. Somebody somewhere let off a flare. It arced into the sky, a green firework leaving a phosphorescent trail behind it, until it exploded into a brilliant flash of actinic light. The shadows took on definition, became humanoid figures wrapped from crown to foot in dark black cloth, carrying black-barrelled weapons. I snatched up my shotgun and got ready to give the attackers a warm welcome.

‘No rest for the wicked,’ Ivan said.

‘You’d think they’d give some of those poor sinners over there the night off,’ Anton said.

‘Why?’ I asked. ‘Richter’s got millions of them and there’s more coming out of the vats all the time.’

‘There’ll be a few less by the time I’m finished tonight,’ said Anton. ‘I was just thinking about catching up on some kip. I’m not too happy about being interrupted.’

The chanting started drifting across no-man’s-land again. It had an agitated sound to it – the heretics were unsettled by the flares and star shells and the sounds of shooting. The drums took on a more regular, but still feverish, rhythm. A great strangled roar rose like a distant sea pummelling a stony shoreline. It was followed by shouts and the sound of more flares going off.

Warning horns sounded again. Our own troops started to pour out of the low bunker doors, the green uniforms of my Lion Guard crew mingled with the grey of the Grosslanders whose spines we had been sent to stiffen. Some of the likely lads were adjusting the straps of their rebreathers. Others had clearly just snatched up their weapons. One or two had bare feet. I could see the whitish mould on their toes, the places where the skin had cracked and leaked pus. They had probably been washing their feet when the alarm

sounded. They were out of luck now. They'd better hope we didn't run into any contact gas. Then they'd have more than losing their toes to worry about.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWO

More and more heads popped out of the bunkers and blockhouses. Men picked up guns and stood ready to defend their trenches. I ran along the front and shouted at the Grosslanders to get back in. As senior NCO, command had fallen to me since Lieutenant Jensen had taken a bullet through the brain. There were enemies coming across no-man's-land who would be on us before those coming through the trenches. They needed to be shooting at them first.

I raised the periscope again. The black-clad assault troops had vanished into the cover of shell-holes and behind ridges, but a new wave of heretics was sometimes visible in the distance through the gaps in the mist haze and gas clouds. They were throwing themselves over the lip of their trenches and scuttling forward in a half-crouch that suggested they were somehow less than human. Perhaps it was the case. Rumour had it that some strange things were born in vats in those distant mountain citadels.

Lieutenant Prost of the 66th Grosslanders moved along the line. His gaze passed studiously over us. We were not part of his command. I was a mere NCO but I was also part of Macharius's personal guard and, even with his fortunes at a low ebb, Macharius's name meant something. He was still supreme commander of the crusade, and who knew what influence we might have? It was amazing how much that counted with certain officers in certain line regiments.

The Undertaker had dispatched us here to check on this section of line

when communication went down and we had not been able to get back to our own section. Our cold-minded former lieutenant had not become any less strange as he had worked his way up to field command, but his grasp of basic tactics was as sound as ever. We were stuck here in our ambiguous position. We carried papers that told people who we were and they were marked with the seal of the Lord High Commander's office. I had been in such situations before – I knew that if we asked for something we would most likely get it, just so long as we did not provoke the prickly pride of the officer class.

Prost barked orders emphasising what I had already said. I thought about that great human wave advancing across no-man's-land. With proper artillery support it would be smashed even as it set out. Hell, with Old Number Ten, the Baneblade that Ivan and Anton and I had started our careers on so long ago, we could have ended the attack there and then.

Screams sounded now as the bunkers opened up across no-man's-land. Lasguns lit the night. Mortars churned the mud. Here and there explosions flared where someone blundered into a landmine or an unexploded shell.

I looked at the squad of men in tattered green uniforms around me. They were waiting for orders. I was not too troubled by the advance across no-man's-land – the bunkers had been positioned so that their fields of fire raked the open approaches. They would slow or kill huge numbers of the enemy.

My main problem was the suspicion that this was a diversion, intended to focus attention away from the assault squads and attacks coming in along the trench lines themselves. Much as I disliked it, Anton's earlier idea had suddenly started to sound good. We needed to undertake a quick reconnaissance along the front line just to make sure.

I raised my hand and indicated the others should follow me. I kept my head down while I did it. Despite Anton's overconfidence I was not sure that there were no enemy snipers around, and people giving orders always make tempting targets.

We trudged down the line, passing the burned-out remains of another Leman Russ which had been hastily converted into an armoured strong point. A heavy bolter team were poking their heads and their weapon out of the place where its turret had once been. The weapon roared as they took their toll of the incoming heretics.

We passed more bunkers. Over each bunker entrance were bits of wood or scraps of card with joke signs inscribed on them, giving the bunker's name. Some of them had lines scratched through the alien script of the heretics and words in Imperial Gothic written beneath. I know for a fact that during my time on the front some of those signs had been changed around a hundred times. Where once the crusade had leapt from star system to star system, now we were reduced to bickering over a few kilometres of sodden earthworks.

We came to a fork in the trenches. A crossroads sign announced that this was where the Great Trunk Road branched into the Street of a Thousand Taverns and the Night Bazaar. I gestured for Anton and Ivan to take a couple of the lads and move to point down Tavern Street. Heads down, they scuttled by me along the left-hand branch. The joking had gone out of them and they were all efficiency now. Anton held his sniper rifle at the ready. Ivan had a grenade in one hand and his lasgun in the other. I clutched my shotgun tight, made sure no one was in front of me and ran along the duckboards towards the so-called Night Bazaar.

When we'd first arrived all of these trenches were an incomprehensible maze where everything looked alike. Now they seemed as different as two adjoining neighbourhoods in Belial. I made out the midden piled up outside the facetiously named Officers' Quarters bunker, and recognised the scratches on the doors of Hogey's Grand Emporium where shrapnel had sliced the plasteel and peeled away the paint from the shattered remains of a Chimera. They were familiar landmarks now. We headed down Sewer Street, a trench that was basically just one big latrine, moving into the Great Bog, a circular area used as a combination of rubbish dump and public toilet.

The clouds parted and the skull moon glared down. The lesser moon was halfway across the sky. A star shell exploded, sending shadows flickering weirdly through the trenches and illuminating the bodies that sprawled around us. They were in the grey uniforms of the Grosslanders. I was all too aware that death had touched this place. Some of the corpses were already crawling with the fat-bodied bore-flies. They liked nothing more than to feast on the flesh of the fallen, before laying the jelly eggs containing their larvae.

I narrowed my eyes. A man lay with his throat cut from ear to ear, a

splatter of red blood down his chest, covered in crawling insects. An officer sprawled face down, a lho-stick near to hand, a wisp of smoke still rising from the tip. A soldier with a faintly familiar face slumped over a packing crate on which lay a deck of cards and an open copy of the Imperial Infantryman's Primer. The air inside my rebreather tasted stale. Something in my brain screamed that I ought to be able to smell the odour of death. I could hear the troops behind me shuffling their feet; all of them knew better than to get in front of me when I had the shotgun in my hands.

My brain continued to gibber. Panicked thoughts raced through it. What was I missing here? Where were the enemy? They must still be close. I checked the ridgeline of the trench. There were faint scuff marks on some of the crenulations. Maybe the assault team had come over there. Or maybe they had come down that branch in the trench. I moved slowly forward, my finger almost twitching on the shotgun trigger, the weapon heavy in my hand.

We moved along the trench beside the open sewer. Someone had been making improvements recently by the look of it. Pipes emerged from beneath the water as if workers had abandoned an attempt at plumbing halfway through the process. My brain registered that, but my eyes wandered on.

I counted corpses. Ten. Twenty. Thirty. I stopped counting. A whole platoon had gone down here and there was no sign of their attackers. With every step I felt like I was sticking my neck further and further into a trap, moving further and further away from safety. Reinforcements were getting more distant. The chanting of the heretics was getting closer.

A bore-fly landed on my goggles. More joined it. They crawled across the glass, partially obscuring my vision. I shook my head but they did not move. They were bigger than bluebottles, with bloated thoraxes and wings that seemed the same colour as the unnatural oils that floated on the surface of the chemically tainted puddles.

Had the enemy used gas? The thought sauntered across my brain. Images of men with cut throats flickered through my mind. Maybe they had taken out the sentries with it, paralysed some of the men, but there was more to it than that. All of the corpses I could see were wearing rebreathers. Not that it mattered much. There had been dozens of consignments of faulty masks sent to the front. Some said it was simply the usual incompetence of the

Imperial manufactorums. Other claimed corners were being cut to fatten the profits of the merchant houses. I had heard Macharius rail against such things often enough not to dismiss the possibility.

Rebreathers, I thought. It niggled at my mind. I knew I was missing something but I could not work out what. I moved along the duckboards over the sewage trench. I thought about all of those naïve newcomers who never checked the filters on their masks, who trusted that they would work and who died, their lungs filling with froth, during the first gas attacks. I had tried lecturing them. I had tried setting an example. I had tried many things, but some people always know it's not their problem, that death always comes for somebody else, until that final moment when they realise that they are not immortal after all.

I looked down at the latrine trench and saw the brown mix of excrement, urine and mud. I noticed the faint swirls in it that were not caused by the rain and then I knew…

A bump emerged from the muddy mess. I blinked. It took a heartbeat for my brain to process what I was seeing. Something erupted out of the latrine trench. Instinctively I pulled the trigger on the shotgun and the thing came apart. The impact of the shot revealed the red of blood, the pink of flesh and the white of bone. The torn form of a heretic soldier flipped backwards into the mess.

I heard shouts from behind me as surprised soldiers responded more slowly than I had. The enemy assault squad had been waiting below the surface of the latrine trench, breathing through snorkels, examining us through periscopes. Those had been the strange pipes I had noticed at first.

Along the line horrified Imperial Guard soldiers were engaged in close combat with foes who dripped a trail of slime behind them and gurgled a name that sounded like Nurg-Al from deep within their chests. There was an awful suggestiveness about the name. Hearing it made the hairs rise along the back of my neck, and I felt an ominous sense of foreboding that made me want to stop the chanting any way I could.

The attackers were well trained, had the element of surprise and inspired horror and revulsion, but my men were holding their own. They were members of Macharius's elite guard, after all. They might even have been able to turn the tables on their attackers by the fury of their counter-assault had not more heretics erupted from the bunkers behind us, thrusting with

blades, firing autoguns. An attack from two sides was almost enough to erode the courage of any warrior. There is nothing like the sensation that you might be stabbed in the back to get you looking over your shoulder, fighting with less than your customary efficiency and making you think about running for it.

I pumped the shotgun and twisted at the waist. A group of heretics was charging towards me. I took a heartbeat to line up the shot and pulled the trigger. The load of pellets ripped through the enemy, sent them tumbling back involuntarily into the mud and the latrine pit. They would not be emerging this time.

I glanced around and saw that Tomkins was down. His bayonet blade had sliced away mask, cowl and upper tunic from one of the heretics and I had a sudden horrific view of the cultist's exposed features. His skin was near-albino white. His eyes were bloodshot and marred by tiny broken veins. Boils erupted from his skin. Red rashes ran like rivers between them. He looked as unhealthy as it was possible to be and remain mobile, and yet he fought with the feverish strength of a berserker. This was a product of the vats.

I brought the butt of my shotgun down on his head. His skull broke like an eggshell, spilling discoloured brains everywhere. Flies buzzed around him and I had the sudden violent illusion that they had been released when the bones of his head had shattered. I told myself that could not be the case and took a moment to try and understand the situation.

Most of my men were down. All of my squad and the other two squads that had been following me had been overwhelmed by the double-pronged attack from the trench and the bunker wall. A few were still fighting, but it was only going to be a matter of time before they were overpowered by the scores of heretics swarming over them. The shotgun had bought me an extra moment or two but I was going to be hauled down myself unless I did something.

Autogun bullets whizzed around me as I blasted a path to the trench wall with the shotgun, slung the weapon on its strap and hauled myself up over the lip of the parapet out into no-man's-land. There was a small gap, a rise at the trench lip, and at the foot was barbed wire. I could see holes had been stealthily clipped through it and here and there bits of dark cloth clung to the metal spike-knots in the wire. This was where the assault team had

made its approach.

I had only a second to register this and while I did I was unclipping a grenade from my belt. I lobbed it into the trench and sprang forward, half scrambling, half running along the front of the parapet in case anyone got the idea to respond in kind. A few moments later I heard the explosion rip through the trench and a fraction of a second after that I felt its vibration. I threw another grenade in and kept moving, following the line back the way I had come, hoping that all of my own men down there were already dead and that I was not killing them with my grenades.

The muddy earth sucked at my boots. My gloved hands were covered in the reddish soil where I had put them down to maintain my balance. I heard a horrible phlegmy voice gurgle out orders and saw a cowled head poke up over the parapet ahead of me. I swung the shotgun down on its sling and pulled the trigger. The head vanished in a fountain of blood and bone. I kept running, still squatting down, praying desperately to the Emperor.

The muddy earth gave way beneath my boot. I slipped, overbalanced, began to tumble down the slope towards the barbed wire. I threw myself flat, dug my fingers into the front of the parapet, slowed down my slide. Nonetheless my boot slid into the barbed wire and the metal thorns pierced the fabric of my uniform. As I pulled my leg free, the cloth tore along with the flesh beneath it. I was aware of the pain and knew I was badly scratched but in the heat of the action my body was able to ignore it, the way a fighting man can ignore the loss of a limb until he collapses dead at the end of a battle.

I scuttled up the barrier, aware of the sounds of fighting from below. I tried to calculate how far I had come. I was perhaps at the entrance to the Bazaar now, almost back where I started. I did not want to stick my head over the top and get it blown away so I inspected the cut in my leg for a moment, then glanced out into no-man’s-land. Billows of poisonous mist covered it, rolling slowly in my direction. I prayed that when it reached me I did not absorb any of its venom through my open wound.

Where the mists parted I could see piles of corpses, where the heretics had been mown down. It did not seem to have mattered to them. They had come on anyway, rolling forward in a massive wave, as if their lives meant nothing to them. They were expendable: a mere distraction while another more subtle assault had flowed over our position.

I pulled out the periscope and raised it over the parapet, from the wrong side this time. Down in the trench I caught sight of a green-uniformed Lion Guard squad locked in battle with the cultists. I could see Ivan, his mechanical arm covered in blood, brandishing the severed head of a heretic. It looked like he had pulled it clean from the neck. Anton knelt beside him and calmly snapped shots off with his sniper rifle. I could tell from his stance that he was filled with tension and excitement.

I twisted the periscope and saw a horde of heretics rushing towards them along the trench. I pulled out another grenade, lobbed it and crawled back along the brow of the parapet, tossing more grenades as I went. The enemy were so packed in that part of the trench that I could not miss. Gobbets of flesh and fountains of blood spattered me in the wake of the explosions. I kept tossing grenades. I had run out of explosives but I still had the phosphorescents so I lobbed them in as well. Even through the filters of my rebreather I thought I smelt the stench of burning, rotting flesh. I told myself it was my imagination.

A chain of explosions thundered and a line of fire filled the trench. Either I had hit a fuel dump or some of the heretics had been carrying something incendiary and I had set it off. No matter, the results were gratifying. I made my way back along the trench line for the fourth time. Black clouds emerged from it and the sound of shooting had stopped.

‘Ivan!’ I bellowed. ‘Anton! Can you hear me?’

‘Is that you, Leo?’ Anton replied.

‘No! It’s my ghost! What do you think?’

‘It has to be him,’ I heard Anton say. ‘It’s too sarky to be anybody else.’

‘I’m going to stick my head above the parapet now! Try not to blow it off!’

I extended the shotgun above my head with both hands. I figured that if someone was going to shoot me it would be better to lose a hand. I left it over the parapet for thirty seconds.

‘What are you waiting for?’ Anton asked.

‘I’m waiting to see if any one of you is trigger-happy.’

‘Well, I think you got your answer.’

I stuck my head up and saw a line of faces looking up at me. I glanced along the trench line and saw more dead heretics, slaughtered by my little ambush and fire from Ivan’s squad. Flies buzzed everywhere. Corpses lay all about. Even through the filters of my rebreather mask I caught the smell.

I jumped down into the trenches and Ivan was slapping me on the back.

‘I thought we’d seen the last of you there when those heretics came charging down the trench.’

‘They got everybody else,’ I said. I glanced around at the others, expecting to see blame written on their faces. I had lost three entire squads to the ambush by being too slow on the uptake. No one except myself seemed to be accusing me of anything. I figured I could do a good enough job of that until we got back to headquarters, when doubtless I would have some explaining to do.

‘What did you find down your fork?’ I asked.

Ivan shook his head. ‘Not a thing. Whole place was abandoned. Just like it was supposed to be. What happened to you?’

I told them. Anton’s eyes grew ever narrower. ‘You mean I need to check for assassins every time I take a dump now? That will take all the fun out of it.’

‘Look on the bright side. Think about what it will be like for them,’ I said.

The words had no sooner left my mouth when air-horns sounded down the trench line. Three short blasts, then three long blasts, then three short blasts. It was not a good sign. It meant that a huge enemy attack was incoming.

‘Best be heading back,’ I said. ‘We’re going to be needed.’

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THREE

I could hear the drums sounding along the trenches and more of that phlegmy chanting. Much more.

I was all out of grenades and the rest of the squad had very few. There would be no repeat of my ambush, not tonight; perhaps not any night, unless we could find a better place to make a stand.

As we made our way back along the trenches, I found I was limping. I looked down at my leg, which felt stiff. When I took out a bayonet and sliced at the cloth, I spotted odd black circles around the barbed wire punctures. I swabbed at them, hoping I was not already too late. I'd seen men lose legs from lesser things on Loki.

Ivan was frowning. He knew better than most what these things could lead to. I doubted there would be any bionics available for me out here. We had left access to such things a long way behind the front lines of the crusade. Fewer and fewer supplies were getting through.

'What you think?' Ivan asked.

'We fall back to Brand's Fort,' I said. 'It's got the best chance of holding out against a big assault.'

'It's a death-trap if we're caught in it.'

'This whole salient is, unless we're reinforced soon. At least there we'll be dug-in with food and medical supplies and as much ammunition as we're ever likely to get.'

Brand’s Fort was a massive bunker excavated from the inside of a small hill and covered in rockcrete. Over the past couple of years it had been reinforced and reinforced again, with more weapons blisters, more rockcrete and more barbed wire. Effluent sumps poured slimy liquid down the sides. Skeletons lay within clusters of wire. Some joker had built a small wall of human skulls around the base of one of the bunkers and then spelled out the words *Come and die here* in bones on the slope beneath them. Where did these people find the time?

A Banshee scream filled the air and there was the sudden thunder of an explosion. I threw myself flat and all the Lion Guard around me did the same. The distant heretic batteries had opened fire once again.

Anton spidered his way up alongside me – all long legs and elbows – and out of the side of his mouth said, ‘I wonder if this is all part of Richter’s Great Plan.’

I knew what he meant but I wasn’t going to be drawn into a reply. It was possible this was an artillery barrage meant to precede the rebel attack and that there had been some mistake on the enemy side that had resulted in its delayed launch. The Emperor knows I’ve seen enough such things happen on our side of the trench system. Or maybe this was the harbinger of another assault.

We lay there for long minutes, acutely aware that it would only take one of those shells to drop on our section of trench and we would all be gone. I felt the earth shake beneath me. The pain in my leg was getting worse and I felt a little light-headed. I told myself it was because we’d been on short rations for so long, but part of me knew that it was not hunger.

I raised my head and watched a cluster of explosions stalk up the side of Brand’s Fort, carving out new indentations in the rockcrete, destroying the wall of skulls and the message written in bones.

A crouched figure made its way up the trench towards us. He wore the grey uniform of a Grosslander with a yellow armband that marked him as a messenger. His hand was fumbling nervously in his belt for a pistol. I waved at him to let him know that even though we were not part of his regiment we were not enemies.

‘What’s new?’ I shouted in Imperial Gothic.

He moved up to our position and said, ‘Big heretic offensive incoming. I’m on my way to the Great Bog to let Lieutenant Snorrison know he

should hold his ground.’

‘Snorrison is dead, along with his whole command,’ I said.

‘You sure?’

‘I was there not an hour ago. Assault squad hit his position and wiped it out. Not five minutes later a crowd of heretics came through. We bloodied their nose but we didn’t have enough to hold them.’

‘You should have,’ he said accusingly.

‘Is my name Snorrison?’ I asked. ‘Am I wearing a Grosslander uniform?’

His eyes widened behind the lenses of his rebreather mask and I think for the first time he noticed the lion emblem on my tunic. He probably couldn’t tell the colour – with all the grime it would have been hard.

‘No, sir,’ he said shakily. He looked into the distance, embarrassed. ‘You sure the lieutenant is dead?’

‘Either that or he’s run away,’ I said. ‘There was nobody left alive in the Great Bog.’

‘Lieutenant Snorrison would not do that,’ said the youth. I realised now he was very young and very green. I could not quite bring myself to feel sorry for him. I was not sure I agreed with his assessment of the situation either. Lots of men ran away here and it was not because they were cowards. The strain of the trenches under constant bombardment ate away at their nerves and that was not taking into account some of the gases, which induced terror in the unprotected.

He shrugged and made to move past me. ‘Where you going?’

‘I need to see if I can find the lieutenant.’

This lad was devoted to his duty, that was for sure. I was not even offended that he would not take my word for it. He had been given orders to do a job and plenty of officers and no few commissars would find him to be in dereliction of them if he did not at least try to carry them out. Plus, he was keen. You could tell by the way he snapped a salute and then raced off along the trench. Silently I wished him luck – he was going to need it.

We kept moving towards the fort.

The fort was not quite so easy to enter as the bunkers back in the trenches. I had to shout down an intercom system that was basically just a collection of pipes. I gave my name, number and a password that was several days out of date and stood so that my face was visible in the view periscope.

This being the Imperial Guard, it took half an hour for someone finally to recognise me and let me in. When the airlock door was opened, the gatekeeper looked me up and down sardonically and sniffed. It was Sergeant Matlock. He was recently promoted, a martinet and a disciplinarian who came from Macharius's home world and had been in the service of a family long allied with the Lord High Commander. I did not like him and he returned the favour.

'Sorry to offend your delicate nostrils,' I said. 'I've been fighting.'

His aquiline nose wrinkled further. His nostrils dilated. He was struggling to find a pithy reply. I interrupted his train of thought. 'I need to see the colonel.'

'You were supposed to be back two days ago.'

'The heretics decided that they required my company a bit longer.' I was already limping past him down towards the local command centre. It was not quite a different world in the fort but it was close. The squalor of the trenches was nowhere visible. The floors and walls were scrubbed. Doubtless Matlock had to keep himself busy somehow. There were Guardsmen in sight but they looked like I remembered once looking myself – their uniforms were clean and untattered. They were shaved. Their eyes were not bloodshot. Their hands were not scabbed. Most of them looked at me guiltily, and felt bad about being down here in comparative safety while I was outside.

I can't say it bothered me too much. I knew most of them would rotate out at some point and join the fun in the trenches. All of them except Matlock. Somehow he always managed to avoid the external duty roster. Someday I was going to have to ask him how he managed that – with a bayonet.

I made my way down the corridors into the command bunker. The Undertaker was there looking as cold and calm as the day he had returned to sanity in the wreckage of Old Number Ten. The juvenat treatments seemed to have worked well for him. The only visible differences were some deeper tan-lines around the crinkle of his eyes and the colonel's insignia on his shoulder.

He looked over at me and I saluted. 'Sergeant Lemuel,' he said. His voice was as flat and emotionless as ever but I had served under him long enough to recognise the question in it.

'Lieutenant Jensen is dead, sir. Killed by an enemy sniper. I am acting

commander of the recon unit.’

He tilted his head to one side. ‘Report,’ he said.

I filled him in on the details of the encounter as quickly and calmly as I could. He nodded as if I were confirming something he already suspected, and barked instructions over his shoulder. A clerk moved some tokens on the paper map of the trench complex. This is what we had been reduced to. The holo-pits had all broken down and had not been repaired. The crystals needed had been requisitioned six months ago but had still not arrived.

I saw the clerk put a number of red counters on the map of the Great Bog and remove the small blue token that had represented Lieutenant Snorrison’s unit. There were not a lot of blue tokens in our section of the line and an awful lot of red ones. In the face of what looked like a giant heretic offensive our trenches were going to be very difficult to hold.

‘What happened to the leg, Lemuel?’ the Undertaker asked.

‘Barbed wire, sir. I scratched it.’

‘Have a medical orderly look at it, get some rest and then report back here in two hours. We’re going to need every man who can fight.’

‘Yes, sir,’ I said. It was clear I had been dismissed. I saluted and limped out of the command pit. Matlock watched me with hate-filled eyes and a sneer on his face.

‘You need to be careful with these things,’ said the medic, rubbing alcohol onto the cuts and tearing off a strip of gauze. We had run out of synthi-flesh a couple of months back.

‘My legs?’ I said, just to be annoying.

‘Punctures, cuts, abrasions of any sort. The disease spores out there are nasty and all manner of infections can get in. Some of them we can’t exorcise.’

‘Why is that, sir?’

He looked up at me. He was a middle-aged man in the uniform of the Grosslanders. No juvenat treatments for him. He knew who I was from the uniform so he was prepared to consider my question in a way that he might not have been if it had come from one of his own sergeants.

‘Don’t know, Lemuel. There’s just something about this place. The diseases here seem cursed. They’re cross-breeding like dogs.’

I could tell from the reference to cross-breeding that he had come from a

particularly agricultural section of Grossland, which was a particularly agricultural world.

‘You said the diseases are getting stronger – how can you tell?’

‘They kill quicker, spread faster and are getting more virulent. The symptoms are getting more alarming too. It’s almost as if someone is using the disease spores as weapons.’

‘Is that possible?’

‘You hear stories. The ancients did it. Certain tech-magi are supposed to be able to do it.’

‘It’s a pretty dirty way of fighting a war.’

‘Most ways are,’ he said, ‘when you think about it.’

I thought about the gas shells and the death commandos hiding in latrine pits and I could not disagree with him. I thought of the hundreds of thousands of bodies spread across no-man’s-land, of all the men lost in mud pits and eaten by rats and killed by faulty rebreathers. I must have winced.

‘What?’ he said.

‘I was just thinking that the war here has been dirtier than any I have seen before, and some of the places I’ve been have been pretty unpleasant.’

‘You’re part of Macharius’s bodyguard, aren’t you?’

‘For more than twenty-five standard years now.’

‘You ever met him?’

‘The first time I met him he was decorating me for bravery. I was with the Seventh Belial at the time.’

‘What’s he like?’

I looked at him. He was a middle-aged man, well educated, well balanced and stable, and he still wanted to know about the legend. Even now, in this long season of delay and disappointment, it still glowed around the Lord High Commander like a halo around the head of a saint.

‘That’s a hard question to answer,’ I said.

‘Do you think he really has been touched by the Emperor?’

Now we were on dangerous ground no matter how I replied. If I said yes, I was passing a religious judgement that was not mine to make. If I said no, I could be perceived as being disrespectful to Macharius if this man should turn out to be one of the fanatical kind who were becoming more and more attached to Macharius’s legend.

‘He is the greatest general of the age,’ I said.

‘You think he will beat Richter then?’

‘I think he can beat anybody,’ I said, ‘given time.’

‘We’ve had plenty of time here,’ said the orderly. Had I misjudged him? Was he one of those men who were critical of Macharius, who sought to undermine morale? It might be that he was just expressing his own opinion but that might prove a dangerous thing to do in these times, particularly since he was expressing it to a man he knew to be part of the Lord High Commander’s retinue.

‘We have however long it takes,’ I said, putting an edge into my voice so he would not misunderstand my real meaning.

‘I hope so,’ he said. ‘I can’t help but feel that time is running out.’ Given the situation he was in – trapped in a fort running low on supplies with an enormous heretic attack coming in – his doubts were completely understandable, but I could not help thinking that in the past he would not have expressed them. In the past no one had doubted Macharius.

For the first time, I wondered if such thoughts were shared by other soldiers of the crusade. For the first time, I asked myself whether I had such doubts. I let the thought flicker across my mind for a few heartbeats and then I ushered it out. Now was not the time to start questioning my beliefs.

I looked at my leg. It had been swabbed. The dark circles around the wire punctures had faded a little, although one of them wept green pus. The orderly wrapped the gauze tightly again and said, ‘Keep it clean and try not to get it exposed again until it’s healed. Otherwise you might lose the leg, or worse.’

I got up and put some weight on it. It held, but I felt a twinge of pain and I knew I was not one hundred per cent. I doubted anyone on the front line was. I limped towards the door, knowing that I should report to the Undertaker soon.

‘If you do see Macharius, tell him the Grosslanders are still behind him,’ said the orderly. He sounded determined and clearly meant it as a declaration of loyalty. He did not sound as if he were afraid I would report the conversation. Myself, I wondered at the fact that he felt he needed to make such a declaration at all either on his own behalf or that of his regiment. Once it was simply taken as a given. Things had changed in the ranks of the crusade.

‘I will do that,’ I said, and laid a hand on his shoulder to reassure him. He

was a decent man, trying to do his best under difficult circumstances and I respected that.

I reported to the Undertaker at the appointed time. He studied me for a moment with cold eyes and a manner that seemed as distant as the stars in the sky. There was no trace of humanity in the gaze he turned on me. For the thousandth time I wondered what he had seen in that strange trance in the wreckage of Number Ten amid the ruins of Karsk IV.

‘Fit, Lemuel?’ he asked.

‘Fit, sir.’ I was not one hundred per cent but I could fight, and every man was needed.

‘Good. We need to hold this line until reinforcements arrive. It’s going to be difficult.’

That was a considerable understatement. I looked at the gigantic stacks of red chips representing the heretics. I looked at our own thin blue line. The Undertaker followed my gaze.

‘The heretics are breaking through,’ the Undertaker said. ‘We have neither the manpower nor the munitions to hold them.’

That was a realistic assessment of the situation I thought, staring down at the complex map of trenches. What he said next surprised me. ‘So we are going to let them pass.’

‘Sir?’

‘We can hold them at choke points at Skeleton Ridge and Plague Hill. We have enough manpower to stop them there if we reinforce those points.’

‘But sir…’

Very few officers would have tolerated being interrupted by a sergeant, but the Undertaker’s strangeness and our long familiarity made the difference. ‘Please, let me finish, Lemuel.’

‘Sir.’

He glanced around at the rest of the officers in the bunker. They listened with the air of men who were going over a plan for the tenth time but wanted to make sure they understood completely. He pointed at the huge stacks of red chips. ‘The heretics will be funnelled into the Second Sector, by the resistance at Skeleton Ridge and Plague Hill. We will hold the bulk of our troops in reserve at those points. Once a sufficiently large section of heretics is within our trench system, we will close the front with swift

counter-attacks from our strong points, leaving a large formation of heretics trapped within our lines. We will then move to eliminate them.’

It was a typical Macharian strategy, I thought, bold and relying on trickery and misdirection. It seemed like the Undertaker had been studying our master’s methods. Of course there were huge risks. We might not be able to close the gap once the heretics were flooding in; we might be ceding a huge forward base to them that they could pour men and materiel into. I thought about it for a moment. It was a desperate plan, but we did not really have much of a choice. It was as the Undertaker said – we did not have the forces to hold this whole section of the line.

‘The Lion Guard will spearhead the counter-assault, Lemuel. You will be held in reserve until then. Lieutenant Creasey will be commanding. Your men can resupply from the dumps on the hill.’

I thought about the huge horde of heretics waiting out there in the cold and rainy night. ‘Very good, sir,’ I said.

‘You may rejoin your unit,’ he said. He snapped off a salute.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOUR

I looked down from the parapet of Skeleton Ridge at the fighting below. It was all visible through the magnoculars. The flash of the lasguns, the glare of phosphorescent grenades, the bodies impaled on stakes and trapped in barbed wire. The chatter of autogun fire and the roar of explosions drifted uphill. The bulk of the fighting was taking place below us, in the sector in which the heretics had been allowed to pass.

Tens of thousands of corpses were strewn across the hillside. The heretics had not been allowed to pass on Skeleton Ridge. We had chopped them down every time they tried to mount the slope. At one stage it had come to particularly bitter hand-to-hand combat but we had held out, only just.

‘I hope the Undertaker knows what he’s doing,’ Anton murmured close to my ear. I could follow his thoughts. The heretics were pushing forward in their tens of thousands. They were following the line of least resistance, convinced that they had scored a major breakthrough. In a sense, they had. The question now was whether we would be able to use that against them.

‘It’s a good plan,’ I said.

‘It’s the only plan,’ said Ivan. ‘Look at those frakkers. How can one lousy planet keep producing so many soldiers? We kill millions of them and millions more keep coming.’

‘There’s no more down there than a good-sized hive could produce,’ I said.

‘Yes, but there’s a lot more of them than there are of us. And there’s

something strange about them.’

I knew what he meant. When I searched those corpse faces on the hill below us, they were all pocked with boils and suppurating abscesses. Their eyes were pinkish. Their skin was blotched. There was a sameness about them that was not the similarity that all corpses have, the stricken look of the fallen soldier. I looked from one to the other and saw what appeared to be a family resemblance among the faces. Looking at the nearest corpses, something niggled, and slowly what it was that was disturbing me floated to the surface of my mind.

Some of the faces were more than just similar. They were identical, like twins. I counted the same face a dozen times as if it had been stamped from a mould. It dawned on me that if I kept looking I might find it a thousand times. Once I started looking I saw that there was another face, also replicated, and another and another. It was as if all those warriors down there had come off a production line in a Guild Manufactorum on Belial. It was a facility that produced soldiers and it had maybe a dozen models. The warriors facing us were being grown in vats, or something worse, I felt sure of it. I suspected they fought so hard because they knew they were going to die anyway. They all seemed riddled with disease.

Even as I watched, the stomach of one – bloated hugely with corpse gas – exploded, sending a cloud of blood and entrails and something else into the air. The mortal remains spattered to the ground around it, but the extra stuff seemed to float in the air, like spores adrift on the wind.

‘That was quite a fart,’ said Anton, trying to make a dumb joke of it as always, but Ivan was ahead of him.

‘What new hellishness is this?’ he asked. More and more of the corpses were exploding, entrails bursting out, clouds of spores hovering over them. I glanced around and shouted, ‘Everybody make sure your rebreathers are tight.’

The men were Lion Guard. They should not have had to be told, but I like to be certain. I walked along the line making sure all of their masks were well adjusted and then I returned to the post where Anton and Ivan were waiting. I raised the magnoculars and checked again, for something had struck me.

I was right. The corpses that were exploding all seemed to have the same face, and it was one I had not seen before in previous attacks. I thought

about what the medic had said, about new diseases being cross-bred. Maybe this new type of soldier was a new type of weapon bearing a new type of plague.

Even as the thought was running through my mind, a shot rang out. I looked at Anton who had raised the sniper rifle to his shoulder and fired. ‘One of them was moving,’ he said. ‘One of the heretics. He must not have been quite dead.’

Lasguns fired along the line now, bolts cutting through the gloom. I wondered whether Anton’s shot had triggered a nervous reaction and the men were simply spooked, but a corpse rose from the heap on the hillside and tottered forward a few feet, blood dripping from its eyes like tears. It got caught in the barbed wire and tried to continue, its flesh being raked off by the spikes. Anton’s shot exploded its head and it fell.

More and more of the corpses had started to move, pulling themselves up.

‘Must have been playing dead,’ muttered Anton, but I knew he was wrong. Several of the bodies were trailing their own entrails. One of them had a hole in his chest cavity that showed where his heart had been burned out.

‘Steady, lads,’ I shouted. The Lion Guard kept firing. The ambulatory corpses were put down again.

Ivan said, ‘Tell them to stop shooting.’

I was going to ask why but instead I bellowed the order. I watched and I saw what Ivan had noticed. Each of the corpses staggered forward only a few metres and then collapsed again, and did not rise.

‘Must be some new disease,’ Ivan said. ‘Makes them run around like headless chickens, even after they are dead.’

I kept my eyes on them nonetheless. I was unnerved by this latest development. Corpses moving by some sort of delayed reflex action I could believe, but not hours after they had been shot. Men waking up wounded on a battlefield was a possibility, but not in such numbers and not with such wounds. I felt that some new and evil development in the war was taking place.

I kept watching, but no more corpses exploded. No more dead men stirred. Not yet.

I woke from a bad dream of cadavers gnawing on my flesh. The worst thing about it was the corpses had belonged to Anton and Ivan and now it was

Ivan shaking me awake.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

He gestured to the messenger standing by his shoulder. ‘Orders from Lieutenant Creasey, sir. We’re to be ready to counter-attack within the hour.’

I nodded and said to Ivan and Anton, ‘Make sure everybody is ready to move out. Make sure everybody has their grenades ready too. The fighting is going to be close and personal. We’ll be able to smell their bad breath.’

They scuttled away to spread the word. I studied the corpses on the hillside again. None of them had stirred. If we had not all witnessed it I would have suspected I had been hallucinating, that some form of nightmare gas had penetrated the filters of my rebreather.

The messenger was still standing there, looking at me, no doubt wondering why I was studying the enemy corpses so intently. ‘Any message to take back, sir?’

‘Tell the lieutenant we’ll be ready to go,’ I said. He saluted and scuttled away, leaving me staring at the cold and enigmatic faces of the corpses on the side of Skeleton Ridge.

The Lion Guard began to filter down the hillside along the feeder trench. Sandbags lined the way. The stairs were made from planks of wood, bits of metal, old ration tins half-buried in the muddy earth. Anything that would help give a foothold. Obscenities had been inscribed everywhere they could be, along with curses and prayers and the occasional sexually explicit drawing.

At this point the stairwell was only wide enough for one man. I was leading from the front; as I said before, it’s unwise to stand in front of a man with a shotgun. As we moved I prayed that another attack was not launched against the ridge. There was merely a small holding force up there now. We had stripped the defences of every man now that we were trying to close the gap and snip off the salient driven into our lines.

I felt tension building in my body. My mouth was dry. My heart was hammering against my ribs. We were outnumbered and we were weary and we were facing an enemy that seemed to have almost infinite resources in men and materials. In the long run we would lose if things continued as they were. We held only small footholds on Loki now and our supply lines

back to the Imperium were long and faulty. The enemy had industrial cities full of productive capacity and access to unholy magic that let them create new armies of obscenely fanatical soldiers. In my youth, I would not have believed in such strange technological sorceries, but I had travelled too far and seen too much to doubt them now.

As I marched I wondered about things. How did those bodies decanted from vats learn? Did they come into the world with blank minds? If so, how was knowledge impressed into them? During the Dark Age of Technology the ancients were said to have possessed machines capable of such wicked miracles, but they had been lost a long time ago. Or had they? Was there something surviving on this world that tapped into those grim secrets?

I took a deep breath and tried to empty my mind of such speculations. It was best to concentrate on the job at hand; that would give me the greatest chance of survival. A faint depression nagged away at me.

What would that survival mean? Just another opportunity to go forth and face death again tomorrow, and the day after that and every day until finally death caught up with me, as it did to every mortal man.

I told myself that the world was getting to me, that the long struggle was bringing me down. I felt another twinge of pain in my leg. Maybe I was coming down with something and my mind was simply responding to my body’s hints. It had happened before.

I glanced out through a hole in the parapet intended to allow a man to shoot from it. I caught sight of the battlefield below us. Flares of light drifted overhead. A shell exploded somewhere. Through the soles of my boots I felt the vibration of its distant detonation.

Lines of the enemy were still moving across no-man’s-land, heading into the deep breach in our lines. The enemy moved slowly but surely. They chanted their gurgling prayers and moved in time to their drummers. They did not seem to have any idea of their own mortality, of the fact that they could die. I thought again of empty minds, and newborn bodies emerging from vats, of unholy innocents being dispatched to fight in a holy war. I felt oddly sorry for them for a moment and then I squashed the feeling as a thing I could not afford.

I was in the trenches proper now. Grosslanders held the position, weapons at the ready, and we Lion Guard filtered past them in the gloom, making for the enemy.

The duckboards of the trenches shifted underfoot as we passed. Bodies lay everywhere. Some of them had the bloated stomachs and twisted faces I remembered from the assault on the ridge. I wondered if they had stirred after death as well.

How many had died here? How many hundreds of thousands had fallen? A bleak vision entered my mind, of all those bodies stirring and beginning to move in the service of some evil power. In those haunted trenches, beneath that evil moon, visible even in daytime, such a thing seemed possible. The Emperor knows I have seen stranger things during my time in his service.

Perhaps there was something about this world that fed on death. Maybe all the killing leached into the soil itself and then fed its dark energy back into those corpses. I told myself to stop thinking about it. There must be other simpler explanations. A disease that temporarily restored motor functions, causing nerves to misfire and muscles to spasm. That's all it was.

I could hear the gurgling chants coming closer now. The earth vibrated under the tread of that oncoming horde. I felt exposed and vulnerable, the front runner of the tiny force that was attempting to stop that irresistible tide. My leg gave another twitch. Black despair swirled like poison in my brain.

The trenches widened out. More bodies sprawled everywhere. Headless, limbless, reduced to bloody pulp by the great ravening beast this war had become. I could hear yelling now. The gurgling voices had a hint of triumph in them, as if every soldier in that onrushing army were utterly certain of victory. They had good reason to feel that way.

I tried to picture the map of the trench complex in my head. I thought I had it all down. My battles along this front line had given me a great deal of familiarity with the layout over the past six months.

Up ahead I caught sight of the first of those brown-clad, mud-covered, sickly looking soldiers. I crouched low, held the shotgun ready, took a deep breath and prepared for combat.

I raced forward and pulled the trigger, blasting a hole deep in the enemy ranks. I pumped it and fired again and then again. The heretics went down like puppets with their strings cut. They had not been expecting this attack. They had thought that the fighting was still a long way ahead of them.

They reacted sluggishly, as they usually did, with the lethargy of men long

confined to sick beds, or whose minds were slower than they should be. They were not very good soldiers, those vat-born heretics. There were just a lot of them.

I saw the uniform of an officer and I shot him, knowing that would slow their responses even more. In these sorts of regiments, the enemy officer corps were the only ones among the heretics who seemed remotely normal, who could respond with alacrity to any new threat. Their followers obeyed them implicitly. In a very real sense they were the brains and nerves of the enemy army.

The officer went down along with a bunch of his minions. Ivan swept by me, lobbing a grenade, and then pulling the trigger on his laspistol. Anton moved up to my side and began shooting with his sniper rifle at any enemy that even hinted at turning in my direction. The rest of our men moved forward sending a hail of grenades and small arms fire into the heretics. We smashed into their line like a bayonet tearing through diseased flesh. In my mind's eye I could picture other squads of Lion Guard on the far side of the salient doing the same thing. The jaws of the trap were starting to close. The question was, who was being trapped, the enemy or us?

We charged forward through the trenches, killing as we went, blowing them up with grenades, setting them alight with incendiaries, blasting them with shotguns and lasrifles. They could not stop us; we had them flanked and we were far, far better fighters. Most of the heretics were worse than even the greenest recruits, but there were just so damn many of them. We cut through them, cleaving their line, but such were their numbers that they simply filled the gaps we made like water flooding into a trench.

I smashed the head of one foe with the butt of the shotgun, stuck the barrel into the mouth of another, which broke his teeth. When I pulled the trigger, his skull disintegrated and the heretics behind him fell. Clouds of smoke were everywhere from the small fires started by the incendiaries, chemical blazes that not even the constant rain could douse.

I faced a heretic officer. He was huge and blubbery, with rolls of fat that distorted the shape of his uniform. A tiny red mouth was visible in parchment-pale skin. He was a head taller than me and weighed three times as much. Numerous chins compressed against his neck as he screamed and gurgled his hatred. Like most of their officer class, he did not seem to have

any boils or rashes. His eyes were pink, though, and a mesh of tiny red veins was visible beneath the skin of his cheeks and forehead.

His movements were slow and lumbering. I pointed the shotgun at him. A body came falling from my right and deflected my aim as I pulled the trigger. The giant loomed over me, and I found myself locked in a bear-like embrace, my face pressed deep into folds of fat, flabby fingers pressing at my throat. I smelt sweat and something sickly sweet, like curdled milk.

I tried to pull away, but for all his softness the giant was strong. I heard his breath come out in phlegmy wheezes. I heard his stomach gurgle. I had dropped the shotgun. I brought my fist around and buried it in his belly. It was like poking the side of some huge balloon. My hand sank in and then simply recoiled as if I were hitting rubber. I looked up and saw that he was smiling serenely as he choked the life out of me, a look of dreamy satisfaction on his blubbery face.

I reached down with my right hand, hoping to grab his nads and squeeze them, and I found nothing. He was a eunuch. Absurdly I wondered if all the officer caste were. I slumped down, faking a loss of consciousness, my fast-weakening fingers fumbling for the bayonet I had strapped to my boot. I pulled it free from the sheath and I stabbed upwards into that vast belly.

He gave a high-pitched scream and his hands spasmed, and I feared in that moment he was going to crush my windpipe. He toppled backwards, clutching at his stomach, a dark red stain spreading across his uniform tunic. I stabbed again, aiming below the ribs, into the belly once more, blade pulling upwards to cut internal organs. His shrieking continued.

Another heretic closed with me and I slashed his throat. I looked around desperately for my shotgun, a weapon I had carried through more than two decades of campaigning, and which had saved my life on multiple occasions. I had a superstitious dread of losing it. I saw it lying in the mud and I dived for it, almost shaking with relief when my hand curled around it. I returned my bayonet to its sheath and checked the shotgun to make sure it was working.

A brief lull settled on the position. For a moment there was a quiet that sounded almost like silence compared to the roar of battle that had gone before it.

I saw Anton looking at me and glanced around to make sure Ivan was all right. He stood propped up against the side of the trench, his bionic arm

covered in blood. The rest of the squad were stretched out behind us. Everyone looked tired, but moved with the nervous brittle energy that adrenaline and the knowledge that you are standing on the knife-edge between life and death brings.

'Tougher than he looked, that last big frakker,' Anton said, 'but I knew you could take him.'

'You could have lent me a hand.'

'You didn't need one and I was busy with some heretics of my own.'

'What now?' Ivan asked.

'We push on,' I said. 'We try and link up with the boys from Plague Hill. I reckon we've only got about another league to go.'

'What about holding the line?'

'Leave it to the lads coming up behind us. We need to break on through and seal off the salient if we're going to have any chance at all.'

Ivan raised an eyebrow and directed a look of the uttermost cynicism towards me. Clearly he felt that our chances were not great. What could I tell him? We needed to follow on through to give ourselves a fighting chance.

Anton's eyes suddenly narrowed and I heard his gasp of fear. I turned to see the corpse of the officer pull itself upright, its fat arms stretching out and its pudgy fingers flexed like claws. An obscene gurgling sound emerged from its mouth – there was an awful suggestion of humour in it. Its glance swivelled to meet mine and I saw hunger and hatred there.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIVE

‘Hell,’ Anton said. ‘Not again.’

The rifle rose to his shoulder and he pulled the trigger. The body of the fat officer fell over backwards, head removed.

‘You can’t say I didn’t help you that time,’ Anton said. ‘I put the fat frakker down for good.’

He had too. I wondered at the way the heretic officer had risen. I glanced around and saw some more of the heretics pulling themselves upright. A few of them shambled forward, arms outstretched, and I was reminded of the way their leader had reached for my throat. I blasted one down with the shotgun. It wriggled forward for a bit before it stopped moving.

Of the enemies that had fallen only a few had managed to pull themselves upright and even they had fallen down once more, like wound-up toys losing their motive power.

‘You see that?’ asked Ivan, pointing at one of the fallen corpses. I did. It was as if all the blood vessels in the corpse’s eye had burst and turned all the white to red. A red film had spread over the iris and only the tiny pinprick of the pupil was visible. I checked all of the bodies that had come back from seemingly fatal wounds and they all shared the same red eyes.

‘Some new form of disease,’ Ivan said. He sounded thoughtful.

‘Looks that way,’ I said.

‘What sort of disease makes a dead body get up and run around like a headless chicken?’ Anton asked.

‘This one,’ I said. ‘I thought that much was obvious. Anyway, we don’t have time for this. Push on!’

We headed on down the trench, chopping our way through more of the heretics. A few more of the bodies rose – not many, but enough. I came across a few more corpses whose stomachs had exploded like the ones on Skeleton Ridge. There were no wounds on them. It was as if they had fallen down dead where they lay, victims of some terrible disease.

Over a few of the dead something seemed to hover, a sort of foul disease spore. The area around their fallen bodies was discoloured by more than just the remains of their innards. It was as if some vile chemical had been produced by their death and tainted the very earth around them. I began to do some calculations in my head. Whenever we were near a spot where the corpses picked themselves up, we found one of these stomach bursters. They were obviously some terrible new weapon. I was grateful for the fact that they did not seem to work very well.

Up ahead of us now, we heard the sound of bitter fighting, of grenades exploding and lasguns pulsing. I heard officers shouting orders in Imperial Gothic and saw men in the uniforms of the Lion Guard in front of us. We had made it to the rendezvous. We had linked up with the force from Plague Hill and cut the enemy force in half. Of course, that just meant that as soon as the enemy realised what had happened we were going to be attacked on two sides, front and rear. Suddenly the Undertaker’s plan did not seem nearly so clever. I glanced out into the darkness from which the heretics had come. For the moment all was quiet. The enemy had fallen back. One of their commanders had clearly realised that something was going wrong and had halted the advance, quite possibly temporarily. It gave us some breathing space.

Behind us the other half of the enemy continued to advance towards our second line. They had not yet realised they were out of touch with their own reserves. A captain emerged from the Plague Hill lines and went to greet our officer commanding. They chatted for a bit and then Lieutenant Creasey came over.

‘Sergeant Lemuel, you and your men will hold this section of the line. The rest of us are going to take those heretics in the rear.’ He said it with the utter confidence that a certain sort of field officer feels he needs to project.

I snapped off a salute and said, ‘Yes, sir.’

‘Mighty quiet around here,’ said Anton, staring out into no-man’s-land. He was wrong, of course. Behind us we could hear the sounds of combat as our fast-moving assault squads overtook the rear of the heretic breakthrough.

I kept the periscope focused outwards, wondering when, not if, the next wave of heretics would come in. I had a sick certainty that they would attack again in overwhelming numbers, and it was hoping for too much that they would not. In the past few months they had shown no shortage of men and weapons, so it seemed unlikely they were going to start now.

‘Too quiet,’ Anton said. Ivan made a tut-tutting sound.

‘Are you going to just stand there spouting clichés from a prop-nov all night?’ I asked.

Anton nodded. ‘Yep. It passes the time.’

‘You can pass the time checking our position,’ I said. ‘Make sure everybody has enough ammo and that their rebreathers are tight. The heretics are going to be on top of us soon and I want everybody ready.’

‘Your wish is my command, milord,’ Anton said. I glanced around to see if there were any officer’s in position to overhear him cheeking me, or worse yet, any of our men.

‘You want me to head in the opposite direction and do the same thing?’ Ivan asked. I nodded. It seemed like a good idea.

Anton scowled. ‘Typical. We do all the work and he just lazes around playing with his periscope.’

‘Get going, corporal,’ I said. They got. I was left standing in the trench, checking no-man’s-land and feeling my leg beginning to ache again. I looked down and noticed there was a sort of green ooze on my trouser leg, level with the wound. It might have come from a heretic, but I did not trust it. I checked the leg – the gauze was leaking the pus right enough. I did not like the look of that at all.

I adjusted my gear again and checked the shotgun, cleaning it with a cloth. I counted the number of cartridges I had left. Only a dozen or so. I suspected there might not be any more forthcoming. Supplies had not arrived on Loki for some time, and shotguns were not the most common-weapons among the Guard. Only my exalted position as part of Macharius’s bodyguard had kept me in supply for this long, and here on the front line

even that was not going to help.

I kept my gaze focused on the war-ravaged land in front of me, at the lakes of mud, the rolls of barbed wire, the piles of bodies, the smashed remains of what had once been tanks. I watched clouds of mist swirl over the battlefield. Where was the enemy? What were they waiting for? Why was there no attack?

I heard a wounded man call out, then the footsteps of a medical orderly rushing to his aid. What was the point? He was most likely going to die anyway. I sneezed and then I coughed. I felt as if a clot of something was stuck within my lung. My breathing had the gurgling quality I associated with the heretics. Damn, it looked like I definitely had caught something. That was not good. The fighting rumbled on behind us; our boys were giving the heretics hell by the sound of it. At least I hoped they were. The thought of any other result was discouraging.

Ivan returned, followed by Anton a minute later. I coughed and wheezed. Ivan's head tilted as he examined me. 'You don't sound so good, Leo,' he said.

'I don't feel so good either.'

'You want a medic?'

'There's others have more need. I can hang on for a bit.'

The words were no sooner out of my mouth when I heard the drumming start up again from the front of our position. It looked like the second wave of the enemy had arrived and was getting ready to attack. I loaded more shells into my shotgun, snatched up a lasgun from a nearby corpse and set it near at hand. I was going to need it when the ammo was all gone.

'These boys just don't believe in giving up, do they?' said Anton.

'Neither do I,' I said.

More and more of our own troops filtered along the trench line. I felt my nerves subside a bit. The door of the trap was being shut. Grosslanders and Lion Guard alike were starting to fill these trenches, most of them currently facing inward, and cutting off the retreat of the heretics behind us. I propped myself up on the trench wall and fought off waves of dizziness. The skull moon beamed down from the darkening sky. It seemed to be smiling, which was not a reassuring sight.

The drums and the chanting had stopped. Despite my fears the next wave

of heretics had not rolled in. It looked like we had successfully stopped the latest enemy offensive. Anton was whistling cheerfully. Ivan had produced a flask and was sneaking a sip from it as he oiled the joints of his prosthetic. I crunched on stimm tabs and painkillers and felt a little better. There was a satisfying sense that it was all over, that we had somehow snatched victory yet again. You could tell from the jaunty air of the soldiers. They were chatting in an almost relaxed manner, despite the occasional sounds of combat still coming from within the salient.

It was then that the shells started to howl overhead. I swear they sounded like no other shells I have ever encountered – they made a Banshee-whine as they fell, like the voices of souls in torment. Some of them left a trail of greenish phosphorescence in the air behind them, whizzing across the sky like dim star shells or ghostly meteors. I wondered what they were being aimed at. They were falling in front of us and behind us. It was perfectly possible the heretics were aiming at their own men, but they did not seem to care.

At the first sound of their falling, I threw myself into cover, with Anton and Ivan beside me and other Lion Guard all along the trench line. I heard a weird sound, like a muffled explosion deep underground. It sounded again and again as the barrage rained down and I realised after a while that it was the shells going off. They were not high explosive. That was for certain.

‘What are they up to now?’ Ivan asked.

‘Some new trick no doubt,’ I muttered.

Billows of greenish, glowing mist spurted down into the trench. I heard a man cough and retch, and I realised we had yet another case of faulty filters. The man did not fall or start to scream or hallucinate. He just stood there coughing.

‘Gas,’ Anton said.

‘They’re covering a new attack,’ said Ivan. That was the logical inference certainly. I stuck the periscope up over the lip of the trench and studied no-man’s-land. Shells were falling thick and fast out there, huge columns of greenish mist leaping upwards in great plumes and then sinking and spreading. Almost directly ahead of me I could see a shell, big as a man, sticking out of the mud. The detonator had failed to go off, obviously, but small trickles of gas and some greenish viscous liquid were leaking from it. I could see it had oddly curved fins on it, which doubtless were the cause of

the wailing sound they made as they fell.

I couldn't see any signs of an enemy advance, though, and I could not hear any chanting or drumming. I turned my head and saw more of the shells still falling behind us. It seemed like the heretics were determined to cover the whole area in gas.

Whatever it was, it did not seem to be working very well. Even men with faulty rebreathers were doing nothing more than cough. I saw Mikals remove his mask and begin to fiddle with the filter pack, his face completely exposed. His eyes were watering and he was grimacing, but he did not seem to have been poisoned. I tossed him one of my spares and told him to put it on right away. He gave me a thumbs up, sat down, still hacking and spitting, and fitted it over his face. Shortly thereafter his coughs subsided.

I turned my attention back to the killing ground in front of us. Nothing seemed to be happening out there yet.

'Looks like we're not the only ones getting faulty gear,' said Anton. 'They should put whoever made that gas in front of a firing squad. It's not done anything yet.'

I was tired and my leg throbbed, as did my head. 'How do you know that?' I snapped. 'You don't know what it was meant to do.'

'Kill us, I am guessing,' said Anton. 'And it hasn't.'

He sounded like a child in a huff. 'If it was meant to spread disease spores it might still be working. The symptoms might not have emerged yet, that's all.'

'You are a cheery frakker this evening, aren't you? We've won. We beat them fair and square and you're still looking for something to be depressed about. I tell you something, I'm glad they never promoted me to sergeant if this is what it does to you…'

'Calm down,' said Ivan. 'Leo might be right. We don't know what these heretics are up to. They've always got some new badness up their sleeves, or so it seems to me. Let's just wait and see.'

We waited like everybody else. The shelling had stopped and it did not start again. The gas obscured our vision for long minutes but then began to disperse or sink into the earth, adding a new chemical colour to the rainwater pools.

Behind us all the sounds of fighting had faded away completely. A red

flare rose over the battlefield, announcing the all clear. It seemed as if we had won. Myself, I did not believe it. The fact that the enemy's gas shells had failed so completely seemed too much like the sort of good luck we had been missing recently. I found it hard to believe that our fortunes might be looking up, and, of course, I was right.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIX

Not even the stimm could keep me completely awake. I slept standing up, with my eyes open, and I dreamed strange dreams. I saw the faces of people long dead. I remembered girls I had known on half a hundred worlds. I thought about my old man back on Belial, most likely gone to his grave by now.

My head throbbed. My leg ached but when I checked it again, there was no more pus, just a crust that had hardened over the wound. I cleaned it and changed the dressings. I put down my shotgun and picked up a lasgun and sighted along it out into no-man's-land, trying to get a feel for it in case I had to use it again soon.

I sighted along the barrel and checked the charge. I squeezed the trigger. It pulsed light. No real recoil I could detect, which was strange after using the shotgun for so long. The helmet I had been aiming at turned cherry red at the impact point. I could still hit with the thing then, which was good news, considering my trusty shotgun might soon be worthless to me except as an ornament. I let out a long breath. Sweat ran down my brow. My mouth felt dry and my nerves felt stretched, both symptoms of the fact that I had probably been using too much stimm.

'Nice to see you haven't lost your touch,' Anton said. 'You can still hit the side of a barn door at short range.'

'Do you even know what a barn is?' I asked.

'It's an ancient device,' he said. 'From the Dark Age of Technology. That's

where the saying comes from. It was most likely a war machine of some sort. Maybe a tank.'

I decided to let him steep in his ignorance. With my sweating and dry palms and racing heart anything else seemed too much like hard work.

'Hello! What's that?' Anton said. Shadowy forms emerged from the murk, moving very slowly. I sighted at one. It was a heretic, but there was something odd about it. It shuffled along like a sick man and it did not seem to have any weapons in its hand. A shot rang out from beside me. Anton had put a bullet between the heretic's eyes. He did not seem to be having any trouble finding ammunition, but then he always made friends with the ratlings wherever we went.

'Got him,' he said with some satisfaction. A mass of lasgun pulses went off down the line. Nervous soldiers were firing in answer to Anton's sniping, or, at least, so I thought. Eventually they petered out, as the soldiers realised that another heretic attack was not inbound.

'Tough shot,' I said, unable to keep a note of bitter irony from my voice. 'Particularly with a sniper rifle. You must be really proud of yourself.'

'Every time a heretic dies, the Emperor smiles,' Anton said.

'You sure about that?'

'I'll find out if I ever get to Terra.'

'Because we must have kept a grin on his face every second since we got to Loki,' I said.

'You always have to quibble about everything, don't you?'

'And if you multiply that across every world the crusade is fighting on…'

'It's only a saying…'

'And if you add in all the heretics the Adeptus Astartes must be slaying yesterday, today and every day…'

'You're not going to let this rest, are you?'

I could see more figures moving out in no-man's-land. They were visible amidst the clouds of mist that floated there, not even making any effort to use them for cover.

'Looks like the heretics have decided to take another swipe at us,' Ivan said. He aimed his laspistol at the nearest figure. It kept coming.

'Must be on combat drugs,' Ivan said.

'You think?' The rest of the figures were shambling forward now. Anton pulled the trigger and another one fell and did not get up.

‘That’s how you do it,’ he said with annoying satisfaction. More and more heretics were visible now, moving towards us with staggering slowness. I aimed and fired and burned one down. It kept moving even when its uniform caught fire from the concentrated las-pulses. It made no sound. Not a single shriek of agony escaped its lips.

Something was very wrong here. The rest of the heretics behaved the same way. I saw one of them cut in two by a burst from a heavy bolter. Its hips and legs kept wriggling like a snake after it has been decapitated. Its upper torso dragged itself along.

‘What the…’ I heard Anton mutter. ‘That’s one tough heretic.’

‘There’s something strange here,’ I said.

‘Sorcery,’ Ivan said. ‘Daemon magic.’

‘Most likely.’

‘Just when things were going so well,’ Anton said. There was a childish whining tone in his voice. ‘That’s not fair.’

I understood what he meant. ‘Fair or not,’ I said, ‘we’re going to have to stop them.’

I noticed something else. Many of the heretics were wounded and those wounds were not fresh. They had been inflicted hours ago.

Even as that thought occurred to me, I heard a strange groaning sound from in front of the trench. The bodies out there were starting to stir. I pumped a las-bolt at one of them just as it was rising. Its flesh blackened but it kept moving. I remembered the bodies that had stirred earlier back on Skeleton Ridge; it looked like the same thing was happening again.

The heretics rose. Their eyes were red and they were weeping tears of blood. They did not bother lifting up their weapons. They began to slouch or crawl towards us. One of them was trailing his entrails along behind him; they were grey-furred from one of the local airborne fungal spores, but that did not seem to bother him any.

I took out a grenade and lobbed it among them. They did not dive for cover. They did not pay it the slightest attention. When the grenade exploded, the heretics closest to it were blown to pieces and they stopped moving. The others did not – even if their flesh had been torn open and the bones of their skulls were revealed they kept right on coming. One of them had a huge piece of shrapnel buried in an artery and blood pumped out, but it gave not the slightest sign of noticing.

More grenades rained down on them and tore them to pieces. In the meantime those in the distance kept moving closer. It was as if every heretic we had killed had come back to life to seek vengeance on us. I stopped firing and studied the oncoming horde, looking for some clue to what was happening, to see whether I could find anything that would help us with putting down the red-eyed shambling dead. I raised the magnoculars to my eyes and studied one of the walking corpses.

Its skin was pale and its eyes were red and tears of blood streamed down its cheeks. There was a glow within the eye-sockets like marsh gas seen in the distance, a hint of green under the bloodshot red. Even when a heretic vanished into a cloud of mist you could still sometimes see the dull light of his eyes.

Some of the heretics were chanting. Nuuuughaaal. Nergle. Narghul. Something like that. It was the only sound that escaped their lips. It was as if something had been branded into their brains so deeply they could remember it even after death. Every time I heard the word I felt a pulse of dread inside my skull, as if the mere sound of the name touched some deep-seated source of horror.

Off in the distance now the drums were beating. There were so many of them and they were so in time that I could feel the sound as a vibration in the ground – it seemed that the dead could, too. Their movements started to synchronise, to take on the rhythm of the drum, and they advanced with a raggedness of formation but a precision of step that was eerie.

We kept firing. They kept coming. The only ones who went down and stayed down were the ones Anton shot. What was he doing that everyone else wasn't? Using a sniper rifle, but I could not see why that should make any difference. It was powerful, but not any more so than some of the heavy weapons being used. Then it came to me. Anton always aimed for the head. He was that kind of show-off.

I tried it myself, sending a lasgun shot into one of the dead men's eyesockets. Its head exploded in a bubble of super-heated steam and the corpse fell and did not rise.

'Aim for the head,' I shouted. 'That's where they are vulnerable.'

A few of the men got the message and more of the heretics went down and did not get up again. Slowly word went along the line. The oncoming horde started to slow. I looked at Ivan. There was fear in his eyes and I did not

blame him for it. Fighting against enemies who could come back from the dead was a thing to make the bravest men afraid.

‘It’s the gas,’ Ivan said. ‘This is what the gas was meant to do.’

He was guessing of course, but I saw the sense it what he was saying. We had seen bodies come back to life before, temporarily, back on Skeleton Ridge. Maybe the gas was some sort of catalyst. Or maybe it had triggered something. I was not a technical adept; I had no real clue. Maybe all of those bodies out there had been specially prepared in some way before the battle began. Maybe we had not been the only ones setting a trap, and as that thought ran through my mind, another raced up to join it.

I turned around and raced to the other side of the trench, facing towards our second line, and saw that my premonition was correct. Over there, in the salient where we had trapped them, the resurrected heretics were moving again. They were coming towards our lines from both sides now. We were being attacked on two fronts, just as we had done to them earlier. The trap had become a trap. The situation was desperate and becoming more so with every moment that passed.

Huge numbers of heretics still shambled in from no-man’s-land while their brethren were going to hit us from behind. Even as that thought struck me I noticed that some of the corpses that had not yet been picked up by the burial detachments were also stirring. I dived down from the parapet and smashed the skull of one with the butt of my lasrifle. It fell back into the mud and lay in a puddle of brain and blood and greenish goo.

More of the corpses rose and began to move. If they had possessed brains enough to use their weapons we would all have died in those few moments, attacked by surprise from within our own trenches. As it was, things were still touch and go. A squad of riflemen obeyed my shouts to come help me and we clubbed and shot and sawed off heads until the heretics moved no more.

Lieutenant Creasey had noticed what was going on and he was dividing the force by squad, sending half to cover the salient and keeping half facing no-man’s-land to take out the incomers. I stood up, wheezing and feeling weak again. I was starting to reach the limits of my strength, where neither stimm nor painkillers would help.

‘You all right, Lemuel?’ he asked.

‘Yes, sir,’ I responded. I was not looking at him now. I was looking at the

dead heretics. He followed my gaze to see what was holding my attention. Something was happening to the corpses we had put down. Their flesh sagged and what was within it, muscle, sinew or vein, was starting to liquefy into a greenish toxic sludge that seeped out and formed puddles around them. It was nasty-looking and something in my mind screamed at me not to touch it.

'At least when we kill them this time we don't have to worry about them coming back,' Creasey said. He was probably right, but something worried me – surely it could not be that simple. I headed over to the inner trench, the part facing out into the salient.

Thousands of walking corpses came towards us, moving slowly, as easy to hit as targets on a shooting range. We kept firing and they kept coming with a relentless, terror-inducing urge to get to grips with us. They seemed mindless and that just made them all the more frightening. Normal men would have fled in the face of the casualties we were inflicting on them. These heretics just kept shambling forward.

Our lads kept shooting, but not everyone can make a headshot every time, particularly not under the circumstances prevailing in those trenches, with mist, bad light, and the sure and certain knowledge that somewhere at your back was another undead monster just waiting to kill you.

I felt it myself, a crawling between the shoulder blades, that had me constantly wanting to turn my head. The assault continued, the dead men kept coming and we kept shooting. More and more bodies fell. As time wore on, the process of dissolution came over the heretics by itself. The bodies did not seem able to keep moving for more than a few minutes before they disintegrated into their component slime, leaving only corroding skin and soiled uniforms.

All the while this went on, the drums kept sounding in the distance like the heartbeat of an angry god.

We stopped them eventually. Or perhaps they stopped themselves, whatever was in them burning them out and reducing them to protoplasmic sludge. The assault lasted for over an hour and by the time it was finished we had taken scores more casualties and used up even more ammunition. My head was swimming.

I slumped down with my back to the parapet. I was starting to burn up and

my leg was hurting once more. I thought about the sludge the walking dead had turned into and the pus that had leaked from my wound and my feverish mind found a connection between them.

It seemed to me then that I was just like those walking corpses and that sooner or later I was going to die and be returned to my component parts. I was going to rot on the ground unless I was burned. The sickly stuff oozing from my wound was just a foretaste of that. Even as this cheery notion trudged through my mind, another, even cheerier, followed it.

I started to wonder if I had been infected by the same disease spores as the heretics, if I had somehow picked up the contamination from them. I was sweating. My breathing rasped within my chest, and I was making the same sort of gurgling wheezing noises as they had. It seemed all too likely I was going the same way. Perhaps I had even been infected by the same heretical madness. That might explain why my thoughts had been so disloyal and my feelings so depressed.

Another star shell burst overhead as the drumming reached a crescendo. Heretics were chanting again, the same name over and over again, and it seemed to me that my own wheezing breath was pitched in time to it. Nuuuurghuuuul. Nuuuurghuuuul. Nuuuurghuuuul. Why were they not chanting Richter's name? His men had used to do that back when they fought for the Emperor. And what was it about the name that seemed to echo within my soul and awaken my darkest feeling of dread?

I slumped forward for a bit. Blackness overcame my mind. Strange dreams swirled around me. I saw a mountainous thing, huge and unclean, all green and brown. It clutched its stomach with enormous paws and laughed, and as it laughed thousands of tiny versions of itself poured out of every orifice, like snot, like diarrhoea. Its belly rippled in time to the drumbeat of its heart. All of the little daemons chanted that strange and disturbing name over and over again. I saw them dancing across the battlefield, climbing into the corpses through noses and mouths and ripped flesh and then reanimating the bodies with their evil essence.

Breathing was getting harder and harder and harder. I felt as if I were drowning and at the same time burning. The skull moon beamed down and its face was that of the great laughing daemon. The clouds were the colour of the daemon's skin and when it rained, millions and millions more of the daemon's tiny offspring dropped from the skies, riding within raindrops as

they fell.

Lightning split the sky. It flashed like a thousand artillery pieces going off – Basilisks and Medusas and the like. The tiny daemonlings hit the ground and bounced and scurried all over the battlefield with sinister, supernatural energy.

They were all rushing towards me, swirling around me, clambering over me, their tiny talons buried into my flesh, particularly around my leg. They forced themselves into my mouth and nostrils, choking me. They tugged at my hair and clawed at my eyes. I writhed around trying to crush them, but there were too many and they kept on coming…

My eyes snapped open and I came awake to see Anton and Ivan looking down at me with worried faces. ‘Wake up, Leo,’ said Anton. His hand was drawn back as if he was about to administer a slap. ‘It’s just a bad dream.’

The mouthpiece of my rebreather was filled with drool and snot. I took a hasty breath, pulled it off and switched it for a new one. I did not feel any better, but at least I did not feel like I was drowning any longer.

‘We’ve got company,’ said Anton. I pulled myself upright, weak as a kitten, and looked out into no-man’s-land. Another massive force of heretics was moving towards us. They were not shambling dead but fresh soldiers, newly decanted from their vats and ready to do battle.

I groaned, not so much from pain but because I had grasped Richter’s strategy now. He could just keep throwing more and more troops at us, alternating waves of living and dead until they ground us down and swept us from the face of the planet.

I looked around for my shotgun, checked that it was loaded and prepared myself for death.

They came on and on, marching in time to their drums and their phlegmy chanting. Their green and brown banners so like and yet so unlike Macharius’s own Lion banner fluttered above them. They held their weapons at the ready and fired as they marched, not stopping until they were cut down. Their shooting was not particularly accurate, but it did not have to be – there was a lot of it.

I propped myself against a sandbag and lined up the shotgun where I could reach it. I was not planning on using it until the heretics were very close. I raised my lasgun and fired it, simply snapping off shots. The heretics

seemed better trained than the last bunch, who had been mere cannon fodder. These took advantage of cover, threw themselves down in shell-holes and gave covering fire to some of their comrades as they advanced.

They were advancing along a broad front. We no longer had choke points on Skeleton Ridge and Plague Hill and there was no chance of catching this bunch in a trap.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. I looked up and saw Lieutenant Creasey. A frown was chiselled on his craggy brow. ‘Word has just come in from headquarters. We’re to begin withdrawing.’

‘Me and the lads are to be rearguard,’ I said. I could see it coming and it suited my mood. I felt as if I was dying anyway and I wanted to take a few more of the heretics with me.

He shook his head. ‘You’re to lead the first squads out.’

I wondered how this decision had been achieved. I even considered arguing the toss for a second but then I nodded. There was no point asking who would be commanding the rearguard. I could tell from the expression on his face.

‘Good luck, sir,’ I said.

‘Thank you, sergeant,’ he replied. I saluted and lurched along the line, tapping the men from my unit on the shoulder. Anton and Ivan tagged along at my heels as if they feared I would fall and wanted to be in a position to catch me. Anton somehow even managed to get his head under my shoulder and was half carrying me along.

‘Let go of me,’ I said, my words only slurring a little. ‘I can walk.’

He shrugged and stepped away. I took a couple of steps and fell on my face. Ivan reached out with his bionic limb to help me up. ‘That went well,’ I said, but I made no objections when they kept supporting me.

We began to make our way back through the trench system, while the sound of fighting reached a crescendo behind us.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVEN

The trenches showed signs of the fighting. There were piles of decomposing flesh and greenish slime scattered through them. There were many fallen men in the uniforms of the Grosslanders and the Lion Guard as well.

I raised my head and looked up. In the distance I could see the fortress line that blocked the way into Niflgard. The city was our drop-point and landing site. That circle of fortifications was the foundation against which our trench system rested, and it stretched out from there. The fortresses themselves seemed almost invincible, great ceramite cliffs bristling with weapons. I say *almost* only because in my long career as an Imperial infantryman I have learned that there is no such thing as an untakeable fortress. Any defensive position can fall if the attacker is clever enough or well enough armed or ruthless enough or has enough bodies to expend. Or preferably some combination of all of those factors.

I wondered if we were going to be driven back all the way to the chain of fortresses in that towering wall, to have to give up all the ground we had taken at such a cost in blood and lacerated flesh.

‘No,’ said Anton, and it was then I realised I had spoken aloud. ‘That’s not going to happen.’

‘How are you going to stop it?’ I asked. He gave me a look that was obviously intended to say *shut up there are people listening*, but I was too feverish to pay much attention to it.

‘I won’t. Macharius will.’

I nodded. It was touching to see the faith that Anton still had in Macharius. I told him so. He looked at me as if I were an idiot. That made me laugh. He was the idiot – everyone knew that.

He grimaced and said, ‘Right you are,’ and I realised I had spoken aloud once again. I knew I was babbling now, but I could not seem to stop myself. I began to tell Anton about all the little daemons I had seen, riding in raindrops, animating the corpses. His eyes narrowed. The scar on his forehead squirmed. ‘Daemons,’ I said. ‘Just like that big one on Karsk. The Angel of Fire. Some bloody angel.’

His hand clamped over the filter hole of my rebreather and I realised he was trying to shut me up, by covering my mouth. It was just like the idiot to do something like that. He was going to shut me up all right – by stopping me breathing. I told him so but my words came out as a kind of muffled grunt.

The phlegm was rasping in my lungs again. I felt as if I was choking and I was beginning to cough.

‘I think you’re suffocating him,’ Ivan said. His mechanical fingers removed Anton’s from the rebreather’s filter and I could breathe again, not quite normally, but I felt as if at least some oxygen was getting into my lungs.

‘You think you can stop babbling nonsense now?’ Anton asked.

‘It’s you that babbles nonsense,’ was my witty rejoinder, but I was starting to get some sense of the fact that there were things that he did not want me to say, and, even if he was Anton, there might be good reasons for me not saying them. Some of them were even supposed to be secrets, after all, and Inquisitor Drake among others would not like me spreading them.

I felt very tired. The sounds of violence had stopped behind us – no more shooting, no more screaming, no more explosions. It was peaceful, quiet and really rather nice, and I said so.

‘Damn,’ said Anton.

‘There’s no need for language like that,’ I informed him primly.

‘The fighting has stopped, Leo,’ he said. ‘That means the heretics have overcome our rearguard. You know what that means…’

‘They’ll be coming after us next. Typical heretics. They can never leave us alone.’

‘You two help me with the sergeant,’ Anton said. ‘We’re going to double-time it from here.’

‘Yes, corporal,’ they said.

They grabbed me by the legs and began to carry me forward through the trenches in the most undignified fashion. Behind us I could hear the heretics chanting again. It sounded as if they were giving thanks to their daemon god.

There were sounds of violence behind us again, much closer.

‘They’ve met some of our lads,’ Anton said. Obviously we were not the only people pulling back to the second line. Equally obviously somebody had decided to make a stand. It would not do much good against the overwhelming number of the enemy, but it might give us time to escape.

Anton was looking at Ivan. I could tell what he was thinking. He wanted to go back and get involved in the scrap. I shook my head. ‘Useless,’ I croaked, my mouth suddenly very dry again. ‘You won’t help. You’ll just get yourself killed alongside them. Macharius is going to need every man who can fight. Get back to the second line and find cover there.’

I was proud of myself for forcing out such a long and coherent sentence and I grinned. No one seemed pleased by my eloquence though. They scowled as if I had just told them to eat a great pile of corpse innards or take a swim in the latrine trench. They wanted to fight. Back there, comrades were fighting and dying and the sounds of that combat played on their nerves and damaged their image of themselves as fighting men.

I wanted to say *they are dying so you can get back to the second line and fight another day* but I resisted the urge. It would not have helped and, anyway, they could see the sense of it themselves, or if they couldn’t, nothing I could say would change things.

They picked themselves up and moved on. Behind us the sounds of combat told me that it would not be long before the battle came to us. The heretics were advancing fast.

‘It’s no use,’ Anton said. ‘We’re surrounded.’

I had blacked out for a moment and I had no idea what he was talking about. My leg felt as if someone had been pumping toxic sludge into it. A small daemon was beating time on my forehead with a sledgehammer.

‘What?’ I said. It was not the most intelligent thing I could have said, but you try asking smart questions when you’re full of the latest plague on Loki. It took me a few moments to realise what he was talking about. The heretics had advanced unopposed on either side of us and it looked like they had made even better time. Of course, they were not slowed down by the walking wounded like we were.

‘Heretics ahead of us and on both sides, sergeant,’ said Ivan, managing a reasonable facsimile of respect for a superior on the battlefield. ‘We’re cut off from the second line.’

He sounded quite calm, but it was always difficult to pick out any emotions in his speech. Even before he lost half his face he was a cool one. I looked at Anton. He was sweating and a little pale. The scar was writhing on his forehead, which told me that he was at the very least tense.

‘We’ve been in worse situations,’ I said. I managed to sound calm, too, which was quite an achievement under the circumstances.

‘Care to remind me of one?’ said Anton. ‘I’m having some difficulty remembering any at the moment.’

I took a deep breath. The truth was, at that moment, I was not too troubled at the prospect of imminent death. At least it would stop the daemon pounding on my head with its hammer. And I would not have to worry about losing my leg.

‘You sure they are ahead of us?’ I asked.

‘If they’re not, our own boys have changed uniforms and decided to shoot at us,’ said Anton. I could tell he was in the mood to be sarcastic. He often chose the most unhelpful times for that.

More clouds of the phosphorescent gas were drifting by. There was a slight breeze and it swirled like the mingled ghosts of all the countless dead who had fallen on the trench-scarred valleys and plains of Loki. There were times when I felt certain that it formed daemonic faces who leered down at me. I wondered if any of the others were seeing them or whether it was just me.

I tried to visualise the map of the trench system I carried in my head. With a huge effort I dragged it up from the illness-clogged sumps of my mind. ‘Try the left passage, down along Dead Man’s Trench,’ I said. ‘It’s narrow and it looks blocked but there’s a way through the wire if you are careful.’

‘Field engineers have probably fixed that,’ said Anton. He seemed only

too pleased to be able to contradict me, the frakker.

‘Oh, that’s all right then,’ I said. ‘Let’s just wait here and die because you’re too lazy to go and check.’

‘Illness doesn’t make you any less mean-tempered,’ said Anton.

‘Head for Dead Man’s Trench,’ I said. ‘That’s an order.’

It was the last thing I managed to say for a while. The daemon faces in the mist were whispering to me and I could not quite make out what they were saying.

Dead Man’s Trench had not been repaired. It was long and narrow and for some obscure reason it had been blocked off by barbed wire. The wire was rusty and there were scores of skeletons caught up in it. Some of them wore our uniforms, some of them wore the enemy’s rags. None of them looked like they would ever march in a parade line again.

No one had used the trench for quite a while. It had a reputation for being haunted. Even grizzled veterans swore the spirits of the dead gathered there under the skull moon. Soldiers are prone to telling such horror stories, but there was something about the atmosphere of the place that made you believe the tales.

You could pick your way through the wire if you were careful. The dead men did not object; they just looked at you with big, empty eyes that asked why you were still alive and they weren’t. Today I noticed that there were lots of little daemons scuttling among them, clutching their fat bellies and laughing at me, at mortality, at the futility of life in general. It was strange that no one else saw them. They were ugly little critters with a curious humour in their mocking eyes.

We moved carefully through the trench, following the paths that Anton and Ivan knew were there, and we could hear the heretics chanting in the earthworks that ran parallel. We were in the worst sort of death-trap if any of them decided to walk through the gap between the lines. They could shoot down at us from the parapets and we were slowed by the barbed wire.

I could appreciate the danger in the lucid moments that I had when the daemons weren’t frolicking around me. It did not make me any happier. Anton and Ivan were taking turns supporting me and I did my best to guide my feet and not get myself snagged on the barbed wire. Just look at what had happened the last time I had done that.

The sound of combat still drifted over us. Sometimes the poisoned mists deadened it so that it sounded leagues away. At other times, it appeared to be coming from the next trench or even right by our ears. Our lads were putting up more resistance than had seemed possible at the start of our retreat.

My limbs felt like lead now and my uniform was soaked in sweat. The crust on my leg wound had broken and greenish stuff was leaking through. I wasn't just worried about the fact that I had been infected with the corpse-walking disease, I became convinced of it. Those little daemons were pointing at me and laughing because they knew it, too.

I looked at Ivan through feverish eyes and said, 'If I die, put a bullet through my head. I don't want to come back like those deaders.'

'I'll do it,' said Anton, a little too cheerfully for my liking.

'On second thoughts, Ivan, you do it. Wait until I kill the idiot boy first,' I said.

'The sergeant is hallucinating,' Anton explained helpfully to the rest of our squad.

'Will do,' muttered Ivan, words garbled by his metal jaw. I did not know whether he was talking about doing it before or after I got Anton. Either would suit me.

We were reaching the end of Dead Man's Trench and there were definite sounds of fighting ahead. I clutched my shotgun tight.

'He's determined I won't have it,' Anton muttered. 'He promised me it, too, ages ago, on Emperor's Glory.'

'Now's not the time for that,' said Ivan, obviously as disgusted by Anton's thoughtlessness as I was.

'I doubt there's any ammunition left for it anyway,' Anton said.

'Enough for me to get you,' I said.

Ivan held up a warning hand. The servo-motors whined as he flexed his mechanical fingers. The thunder of las-pulse and grenades sounded ahead of us along with the gurgling chants of the heretics and the whooping war-cry of the Grosslanders.

I did some swift calculations in my head. We could not have reached the second line yet, not unless I had fallen unconscious without realising. A quick look around told me that we were still at the end of Dead Man's Trench. The skeletons still watched, but the daemons seemed to have gone

into hiding. Only occasionally could I see one peeking its head over the parapet and winking at me. It seemed an almost friendly gesture, except that there was an all-consuming hunger in those bloodshot eyes and the teeth revealed by their grins were sharp as those of a needlefish.

‘Sounds like some of our boys are still holding out,’ I said.

‘Sounds like someone is counter-attacking,’ said Ivan. As he did so, he snapped off a shot because one of the heretics had noticed us and was announcing our arrival in his guttural language. At least that is what he seemed to be doing when Ivan’s shot took him in the mouth and burned out his tongue. He made an odd gobbling sound before he fell.

His companions did not take his death well. They turned on us and launched themselves in our direction, a human wave, bayonets fixed, weapons at the ready. Our lads were deploying out of the trench. Some of them had thrown themselves flat and were shooting, while their companions behind fired over their heads. It was the sort of thing that made the difference between veterans and inexperienced vat-bred troops. It bought us enough time to fight our way out from under the empty gaze of those skulls.

A moment later Ivan was charging forward, bionic arm smashing bones, pistol spitting death. The others were with him, weapons blazing, lasgun butts cracking skulls and splintering bones. Anton stood beside me, sniper rifle tracking, and sent carefully timed shots into the melee. Every time his rifle roared an enemy fell.

I watched, barely able to stand upright, clutching my shotgun in what I hoped was a menacing fashion. Very few people will voluntarily charge a man with a loaded sawn-off if they notice it is there. You can’t exactly blame them for that.

For a moment, it looked as if Ivan’s mad rush was going to work and our boys were going to break through. It did not matter where at that exact moment. I think we all felt that smashing through the enemy line would represent some sort of victory. I certainly did. It was just one of those mad instants where you lose sight of the longer-term future and experience only the moment and its emotions.

Then I noticed the heretics pushing in from either side of the emplacement and realised that we were surrounded by an enormous number of the enemy. The only way out was back through Dead Man’s Trench and that was a death-trap. The wire would slow us down and we would be cut to pieces.

The melee began to turn as sheer weight of numbers started to tell. At least the enemy were not able to use their superior firepower in the enclosed space of the emplacement. They were more likely to hit their own men than ours. Of course, that did not stop some of them. They shot and their comrades paid the price, at least until their officers managed to convince them to stop doing it by the simple expedient of shooting the idiots who were firing.

It was not going to be long now, I could tell. There were thousands of them and only dozens of us. They were climbing over their own dead to get to us, chanting that horrible name in their horrible tongue. Every word seemed to be being forced out through a throatful of phlegm. My personal pet daemons had returned, knee-high to a heretic, waltzing and spinning atop the dead, licking bodies with their metre-long tongues, seeming to feast on the death and decay going on around them. Their stomachs swelled and bloated then deflated as they hiccupped and belched and farted.

A cloud of gas billowed across the emplacement and, for a moment, I lost sight of what was going on. I could just hear the screams and roars of men fighting and dying all around me. I could still see the ghastly, spectral faces leering out of the fog. I wondered how those men out there could tell who they were fighting and realised that they could not. Right now it was perfectly possible that heretic was wrestling heretic, and Imperial Guard stabbing at Imperial Guard. It happens more often than you would imagine amid the chaos of battle, particularly under conditions such as those that prevailed on the surface of Loki.

I held my shotgun tight, felt the air vibrate as Anton shot something, heard a man scream and prayed it was not Ivan or one of our boys. A moment later the breeze whipped the fog aside as if it were a tattered diaphanous curtain and I saw the bodies piled high and the wall of heretics charging towards Anton and myself.

‘Kill the frakkers,’ I said.

Anton pulled the trigger and a heretic officer fell. I pointed the shotgun and fired. There was a shell left. It tore a gigantic hole in the heretic line. I pumped and pulled the trigger again and heard nothing but a clicking sound.

‘You picked a fine time to run out of ammo,’ Anton said accusingly. The wall of shrieking, gasping heretics rushed towards us.

It was another of those moments when I knew I was dead. I have lost count of how many times they have happened but they never get any easier to take.

It's always the same. My mouth goes dry. My heart races. I feel that sudden sharp surge of fear that is inevitable when your body realises that it is soon going to cease functioning. In this case, the realisation was compounded by the fact that my body was already struggling with wounds and disease. The visions of dancing daemons swirling through my mind didn't really help much either.

I braced myself for the stabbing of a dozen heretic bayonets. I wondered why they were not already charging at us, keen to take revenge for all the comrades we had sent to greet their daemon gods. I could hear the sounds of fighting, of lasguns pulsing, of chainswords splintering bone to white, bloodstained chips. I could hear someone shouting, 'For the Emperor and Macharius!'

The heretics were charging at us, but their eyes were wide with panic. They did not seem intent on stabbing us so much as keen to get past us. A few of them raced by into Dead Man's Trench, while others threw themselves up the parapet. Their officers screamed for them to stand their ground, or at least that is what I assume they were screaming, but none of the fleeing enemy seemed to be paying too much attention to those orders. They were too busy trying to put some distance between themselves and the green-tunicked Lion Guard coming at them from behind.

These troops were new and fresh and deadly looking. Their uniforms were clean and unpatched. Their weapons were being used with brisk efficiency. It was not them I noticed first though – it was the man leading them.

He looked like a great predator, tall and broad-shouldered, golden-haired and golden-skinned. His movements were poised and deadly. He swept through the melee, a human whirlwind of violence, cutting down a heretic with every stroke of the chainsword he wielded right-handed, while blasting away with the bolt pistol he was holding in his left. There was a poise and deadliness about the Lord High Commander Solar Macharius which he never lost even at the bitter end. He was a perfect killing machine, as completely deadly in his own way as a Space Marine of the Adeptus Astartes.

His coordination was uncanny, his movements eye-blurringly swift. Just

when you thought you knew where he was going to step and whom he was going to strike, he surprised you.

The bullet aimed at him passed through the space where you thought he was going to be. His stroke turned out to be a feint, never hitting where it was expected, but burying itself in flesh nonetheless. A heretic raised his weapon to block the blade and took a bolt pistol shot through the eyes. Another ducked to avoid the killing shot and found himself impaled on the blade instead.

Macharius fought in close combat the way he led armies: swiftly, decisively, with feints within feints and a defence that consisted of the swiftest attacks. He was a living god of war, perfect in all he did when it came to battle. At least that was the impression he was still capable of giving when he chose to enter the fray in person. Seeing him, fighting beneath the fluttering Lion banner, you could not help but feel your heart rise and know that victory was certain.

He battled his way over to us, and I noticed that Ivan was by his side, fighting away, a clumsy half-human automaton compared to Macharius, but deadly in his own way. Macharius's gaze swept over me and he nodded encouragingly and then he went by, killing as he went, leading the massive counter-attack he seemed to have organised out of nowhere.

I noticed then that Inquisitor Drake, his permanent shadow, was with him. Pale where Macharius was golden, thin where Macharius was athletic, Drake nonetheless had his own deadliness. His lean form possessed a surprising strength and an incredible resilience. If he was not quite so quick as Macharius, he seemed just as capable of countering all attacks, possibly because he was capable of reading the thoughts of the attackers.

A halo of light played around his head as he unleashed his psychic powers in terrifying bolts of energy. For a moment, his gaze rested on me as well and I shuddered, for his eyes seemed to be boring into my soul, and I felt he could see the contamination there, the doubts I had picked up, the daemons I was guilty of seeing.

Around Drake were the hand-picked storm troopers of his personal guard, their blank, mirrored visors reflecting the grimness of the battlefield on which they fought. Seen in the shimmering armourglass of those helmets, the landscape of Loki looked even more bleak and terrifying.

In a few more heartbeats, they, too, swept by and more and more troops of

Macharius's personal guard followed, looking stern and efficient and implacable.

I wondered then if this was another of Macharius's famous feints, whether we had been the bait in yet another trap to draw in his enemies. At that point I was past caring. I slumped down against the earthwork wall of the trench, my back against a couple of stray sandbags, and I contemplated the staring eyes of the carpet of dead bodies Macharius had left in his wake. I wondered whether any of them would spring back into motion, and whether they would come to drag me down into death and I realised, at that moment, that I did not exactly care.

I did not feel at my best when I came to. I found I was looking up at the face of Macharius. He was standing talking with the Undertaker, saying something so quietly that even as close as I was I could not make it out. Over his shoulder the skull moon leered. The lesser moon raced across the sky, a small daemonling perched on it, giggling.

I tried to pull myself upright and I noticed that Anton and Ivan and a number of the other soldiers were there along with a few high-ranking officers. They were inspecting the dead and noting the fact that some of the corpses were dissolving into puddles of greenish slime, while others, in a new twist, seemed only to be lying there, their flesh green and corrupt-looking.

Around everything small pot-bellied daemons gambolled, sticking out their tongues, farting and belching, walking along behind the officers with taloned hands behind their backs, their movements and expressions mockeries of the men they were following.

I wondered where Drake was. Why wasn't the inquisitor sorting these little frakkers out? It was his job, after all. Part of my mind, the tiny bit that still held a faint crumb of rationality, told me these were hallucinations, that I was feverish, that I was seeing things.

I pulled myself upright, gurgled for water, and noticed that one of the officers with Macharius did not look like the others. His skin had a greenish tinge. His eyes were mocking. There was something about him that reminded me of the daemons. He seemed to be just as inhuman as them and was fumbling in his belt, pulling his pistol free. I shouted a warning and pointed.

Macharius turned and so fast were his reflexes that he was already reacting to my pathetic attempt at a warning and the sight of the attacker he must have just caught from the corner of his eye. Even as the heretic drew a bead on him he was already in motion, pulling his bolt pistol free from its holster and swivelling at the hip to snap off a shot.

It was touch and go. The laspistol shot seared Macharius's shoulder, melting one of the lion's head epaulettes there. Macharius's return took the heretic in the stomach and punched an enormous hole in it, the way bolter shells do when they explode. I pulled myself upright, and snatched up a laspistol from a corpse. I shot the heretic again, but he still kept moving, animated by some spirit of destruction, or so it seemed.

Others opened fire until glittering las-beams made a net around him and through his body and still he kept on coming. A sniper rifle sounded. The officer's head exploded. I heard Anton give a grunt of satisfaction as the would-be assassin toppled and fell. Someone shouted for a medic and men swarmed towards Macharius.

That's another life you owe me, I thought with satisfaction, somehow managing to forget in that moment all of the times Macharius had saved mine.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHT

I was very weak. I was seeing daemons. And I was not the only one. All around me were thousands of beds, each containing a wounded man, or a sick man, or a man who was both. Adepts of the medicae moved from bed to bed, administering potions, stabbing men with huge hypodermics, lopping off infected limbs with massive medical chainsaws.

Every time I heard the whine of the blade, the splinter of bone, I shouted for them to keep away. I did not want to lose my leg. I did not want a mechanical limb, even if there were any to be had, which there had not been for a long time.

The air smelt of purification incense and gangrene, of suppurating flesh and infected blood. The sound of coughs and screams echoed through the halls.

A medicae adept stood at the foot of my bed. He looked at me with something like horror in his eyes. For a moment, I thought he was going to pronounce sentence on me, to announce that the leg was going to have to come off.

I was almost relieved when he shook his head and turned and looked over his shoulder and said that there was nothing to be done, that they did not have the serums, that even if they did, it was touch and go. He sounded ashamed and embarrassed.

I wanted to tell him not to feel too bad, that we were an army that was running out of ammunition and food and everything else. It was no surprise

to me that we did not have the medicine – we had nothing else.

When I tried to speak all I could do was make an odd gurgling noise. It sounded as if someone had injected a gallon of phlegm into my lungs. Breathing was not easy. Speech was impossible. Two faces drifted into view: one belonged to Ivan and the other belonged to Anton. They both looked very sad. I closed my eyes and fell into strange dreams.

I woke to find a daemon sitting on my chest. That was the weight that was making it so difficult for me to breathe. It looked the same as all the others, fat and pot-bellied, with scales the green of snot and the brown of excrement. It had the same maliciously gleeful eyes and when it saw I was awake it began to use my stomach as a trampoline. Its bouncing caused the contents of my innards to explode from both ends of my body.

Anton rose from beside the bed and shouted for an orderly. The daemon by this point had me by the throat and was trying to strangle me. A huge gob of phlegm was stuck in my gullet. The pressure increased. Blackness swept over me.

When I opened my eyes again death was standing over me in the form of a beautiful woman. I knew her name. She was wearing a nurse's uniform very similar to the one she had worn back in the days when we had first met. She was not a nurse, I knew. She was an assassin.

She was holding a vial of some odd blue substance and attaching a needle to it. I smiled at her, pleased in an odd way that I was getting to see her again before I died. I looked around and saw that Anton was slumped in a chair beside the bed. Ivan was nowhere to be seen. She raised a finger to her lips in the universal sign for silence, then she drove the needle into the vein in my arm and pushed the plunger home. A moment later something burning filled my veins and I screamed before a wave of fire burned all consciousness from me. My last thought was to wonder why she was killing me.

'It's a miracle,' the medicae adept said. 'The Emperor himself must have intervened on behalf of this man. I would have sworn there was no way he could survive without a dose of Universal Purge and we have not seen any of that on Loki for a year. There is not even enough for the Lord High Commander if he should come down with the plague.'

It took me a moment to realise he was talking about me. I certainly did not

feel like the beneficiary of a miracle; I felt as weak as a starving rat. My arms refused to obey me when I tried to pull myself upright and it was all I could do to keep my eyes open. Even listening tired me out.

I somehow managed to move my head first to the right and then to the left and I realised that for the first time in days there were no daemons dancing around me. They were not sitting on my chest. They were not poking my eyes and my heart and my liver with their tiny claws. They were not wheezing into my ear and whispering unspeakable promises. They were simply not there. As that thought occurred to me, I thought I caught sight of one scuttling under a nearby bed. Maybe it was just a rodent.

'So you're saying he's going to live then?' said a relieved voice. It sounded as if it belonged to Anton who was going to burst into tears. I started to wonder if I was perhaps hallucinating again.

'It's not one hundred per cent certain,' said the adept. 'Last night I would have said this man was certain to die. This morning, he has at least a fighting chance. The fever will return. His wound may once again become inflamed, but at least he has a chance.'

'I told you,' Anton was saying. I was not sure who he was speaking to. 'I told you he was too mean to die.'

I let myself drift back off to sleep. In the distance I could hear the chainsaws going, and the screams of men in pain and the gurgles of men dying. It seemed I was not going to be joining them just yet.

'What are you trying to do, kill me?' I asked.

Anton looked a little confused. If I had not known better I would have said he was hurt. 'What do you mean?'

'Well, the first thing I see when I wake up is your ugly mug. That's enough to sap any man's will to live.'

'Ha-bloody-ha! And here I was thinking I would wheel you around the ward before I reported for duty today.'

'I thought you would be fighting at the front,' I said. Anton looked around over his shoulder, as if he were wondering who was listening.

'The front is stable for the moment,' he said. It did not sound like he believed it. To be perfectly honest, I did not believe it. 'We're guarding the space port.'

I looked at him. How stupid did he think I was? Actually, maybe he did

not think I was stupid. Maybe he was letting me know the true state of affairs without spelling it out in a way that might be construed as a treasonous attempt to undermine morale by any commissar. It was possible that Anton was not entirely stupid.

If the space port was being guarded by the elite troops of Macharius's personal guard it was because there was a possibility that we would need to beat a hasty retreat through it. That was tantamount to admitting that we were beaten, that Richter was about to drive us off the surface of Loki, that for the first time in decades Macharius was drinking from the bitter cup of defeat. That was not something that anyone would want to speak aloud. It had a feeling of being the beginning of the end.

I looked at Anton again. For the first time in what seemed like weeks his face was not concealed by a rebreather mask. I could see that despite the juvenat the subtle signs of ageing were there. Around his eyes was a fine mesh of wrinkles. The flesh beneath his chin hung a little loose like the wattles of a hangman lizard. His hair looked washed out, not the straw blond of his long-gone youth on Belial. He was still springy and powerful but the long years and countless battles had taken their toll. They sap vitality and the will to live, in other ways.

He looked me right in the eye and said, 'I am glad to see you're still alive.'

'Me too,' I said.

He looked away, obviously uncomfortable. 'I'd best be away. I have guard duty tonight.'

It seemed an odd thing to hear, so mundane after what we had been through, with the endless battles in the trenches, the dead rising, the strange hallucinogenic gases drifting over the battlefields. The phrase *guard duty* conjured up visions of easier nights on easier worlds when things had been going well. At least for me. He tossed me a mocking salute and shambled off into the night.

I tried to pull myself upright, but I was still weak, so I just lay there and thought about the things I had seen. Had the Emperor really intervened to save me? Had I really seen Anna? Or was she just another product of the fever that had fired up so many strange visions out of my diseased brain? I thought about the daemons I had seen and the odd dreams I had experienced. They had been wild hallucinations, surely, and yet at the same time they had been both consistent and convincing, as if somehow I had

been peering into another world, one that existed just below the skin of our reality, at least on this cursed planet.

Such thoughts are easy to come by in a hospital bed, surrounded by shrieking wounded.

The hospital was packed with dying men. At first I wondered about the lack of care that had been given to me since, after all, I was one of Macharius's chosen guards, but it came to me after a few days that I was getting the best care that was available. Medicae adepts checked me and shook their heads wonderingly and I realised that I had become something of a celebrity in the wards since my astonishing recovery. It turned out I was the only soldier to have done so from the fever I had suffered.

They checked the wound on my leg, which was no longer inflamed, although it was crusted over. They laid cool hands on my forehead and intoned invocations to the Emperor. They wafted incense over me that brought strange dreams and helped control the fevers that I still suffered.

The road to recovery was a winding, circuitous march through fever country. There were days when I was once again sick, when it felt as if daemons were pressing down on my chest and when Ivan or Anton would spend nights beside my bed. There were times, too, when I would open my eyes and see a sister of the Orders Hospitaller, and sometimes she bore a strange resemblance to Anna.

I dreamed of her often, of how I had first seen her on Karsk when we had escaped from the worshippers of the Angel of Fire together, of how I had seen her again on Emperor's Glory, where Ulrik Grimfang, an Adeptus Astartes of the Space Wolves, had warned me against her. I dreamed of the bodies of the men she had killed and I had found, and I dreamed of how she had saved my life.

I knew then with the odd clarity that such dreams bring that our lives were linked somehow. It might have been part of some grand design on her part or just the secret unwinding of our interlinked destinies, but our lives had touched in the oddest and most intimate of ways down through the decades. I liked to think there was some bond of affection there but I was never sure, not even of my own feelings. There had been many women in my life, as there always are for soldiers moving from world to world, but hers was the only consistent female presence I could remember.

I was certain of another thing too. That if she was here on Loki someone important was going to die. It was her nature and the nature of her service to the Emperor, and who am I to criticise? How many have I killed in the same cause?

I remembered too many of the campaigns I had fought in the name of the Emperor and Macharius. I experienced them once more in bloody, sweat-inducing dreams that had me waking in terror to stare at the murals on the ceiling depicting angel-winged Space Marines confronting all manner of xenos horrors.

I recalled the jungles of Jurasik and the orks we had fought there. I remembered the great armoured advance on Karsk IV and the burning winged statue of an evil angel perched atop the mountain-sized city of Irongrad. I marched again across the ice wastes of Caledax and watched men's limbs turn black from the frostbite. I climbed over the peaks of Aquitaine and saw monstrous sentient spiders feast on the flesh of the soldiers they had webbed. I saw living weapons, war machines of flesh, remnants of some ancient invasion of xenos that had lurked like termites in the ruins of the human civilisation they had destroyed. I saw the redemption of worlds ruled by ancient evil cults and I saw the armies of the crusade advance, invincible, until we reached the Halo Worlds.

There everything had gone wrong. There the supply lines had grown too long and the armies too war-weary and the distances too great for reliable navigation even by the great starships of the Imperium. There all manner of horrors had emerged. There we had found ourselves bogged down in endless wars of attrition and even Macharius had seemed to lose his total certainty of victory and begun to whisper blackly of plots and betrayals.

I saw another vision now, of Loki as I had first seen it from space, a ball of green and blue and grey with toxic clouds drifting across seas that had died tens of thousands of years ago by being flooded with poisonous industrial waste. A world of manufactorum-cities whose giant chimneys poured choking clouds into the sky as their inhabitants worked day and night. A place whose landscapes had been blasted by pollution and blighted by the deserts of ash the cities had created.

I saw it as it was now, its greatest city ringed by trenches that stretched out to other man-made mountain ranges where heretics lived and bred and performed obscene rites beneath the glow of ever-burning lanterns. I saw

networks of trenches that stretched as far as the eye could see, and plains of mud on which lay the corpses of millions of men, unburied, forgotten, degenerating to piles of bones and walls of skulls. I saw the clouds of gas drifting from sinkhole to sinkhole and I saw what lay beneath the ground, all of the ancient and evil and horrifying things that burrowed blindly, waiting for the chance to emerge and devour.

And just as these images flooded my mind, I felt something else, a vast dark presence. I looked up and could no longer see the murals above me. Instead I was looking into the grinning frog-like face of the gigantic daemon I had first seen on the front lines. It was smiling down at me, watching me with eyes full of that ancient malicious humour, looking at me the way I might look at a whining mosquito, a thing it was going to reach out and swat when the mood took it, and that mood might well be taking it now.

It reached down for me with one massive claw, and grabbed me in a vice-like grip and began to shake me. It was like being in the grip of an earthquake. My body was being thrown from side to side, and it seemed to me that if this kept up the life would be shaken from me.

The vast and horrible presence loomed over me and I wanted to shout defiance, but I could not. Instead I felt the vast head lower, the huge jaw distend, as if it were going to swallow me in a single gulp. A long tongue glistening with green mucus extended from its mouth and descended towards me, and I knew that if it touched me I was going to die in the grip of some vile disease.

The head descended, the tongue reached out, the world shook as the thing approached. I tried to scream and I snapped open my eyes.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINE

I was looking up at an odd frog-like face but it belonged to the man from the next bed. He had been moved there a couple of days ago after the previous occupant's corpse had been dragged away. He seemed friendly enough, but I was still reeling from the sight in my dream and shrank away from him.

He smiled. His teeth were broad and yellow but normal-looking. There was humour but no overt wickedness in his eyes. 'Easy, brother,' he said. 'It was just a nightmare.'

He pointed to himself and said, 'The name's Zachariah.'

I nodded and took in my surroundings. I was in the hospital. The winged Space Marines were still fighting their fanciful battle against a bunch of particularly daemonic-looking orks. Men were still moaning and screaming and dying. I managed to sit upright. It seemed I had at least enough strength to do that now, although I still felt as weak as if my muscles were made out of water.

'It was just a nightmare,' I agreed.

'We all have them,' he said. His voice was light and pleasant with the faint burr that marked him as a Grosslander. The stained white smock he wore gave no clue as to rank or origin.

'Not like I do,' I said. I was feeling sorry for myself and the words just burst out.

'You see ghosts and daemons,' he said. 'You were muttering about them in

your sleep.’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Do you see them, the disease bringer, and all his children? Little things, they ride in clouds and corpses and spread plague across the world.’

I looked at him sidelong and suspicious. ‘Was I talking about them in my sleep?’ I wondered what else I might have been talking about. I know some secrets that could get men killed. Me included.

He shook his head. ‘I have seen it too. I had trench fever and I saw it in my dreams. I kept my mouth shut because a few others had mentioned it and been shot by the commissar. There’s something going on here that normal folks are not meant to know.’

I smiled at that. He was a hick from a hayseed world and he had put his finger right on the nub of the problem. There were things going on here that we were not meant to know about. The whole Imperium is built atop layers of secrets that men have been buried to keep and that no one except the anointed few are allowed to talk about, and then only with each other. I have caught fragments of those conversations in my time, between inquisitors and Lord High Commanders, Assassins and Adeptus Astartes. They are not things I like knowing, but I cannot unlearn them.

‘You didn’t get shot,’ I said and he grinned.

‘They didn’t think I needed to be, not when the trench fever took me. I was dumped here. This is the place they send men to die.’

‘It’s a hospital,’ I said.

‘That’s what I said.’ He grinned. It was a likeable grin and it made me suspicious. I had never seen him before and here he was talking to me as if I were his long-lost brother.

‘Anyway, I am not the only one who had the dreams,’ he said. ‘Nor are you. I’ve talked to dozens of men from dozens of battlefronts that have had them. They are omens, that’s what they are.’

There was an odd conviction in the way he said the word *omens*. He believed utterly in what he was saying and there was no trace of madness in those cold blue eyes of his. ‘They are omens. Something is happening here. Something terrible.’

I could not actually say I disagreed with him so I kept my mouth shut and waited for him to go. If he was going to spout heresy, I would need to report him to Drake or one of his minions. It was even possible he was one of the

minions, put here to test the faith of those who were waiting to die. Don't ask me why I thought that. I was sick and I was weary and I have seen and heard stranger things.

'Our dreams are not the only omens,' he said. Once again there was an ominous conviction in that light flat voice. I don't know what it was that was so convincing, but there was something there, a certainty that made you believe, if not in what he said, then in the fact that the man uttering the words took them as the total truth. It spoke of a sort of faith, terrible in its simplicity. It was the sort of faith that many of us had once had in the success of the crusade. In this man, it seemed to have curdled into its opposite.

'What do you mean?' I asked. I was encouraging him because I was honestly curious.

'You hear stories,' he said. He looked over his shoulder to make sure no one was listening, as if, even here surrounded by the dying, perhaps dying himself, he suspected that there were spies. He was quite possibly correct. 'The crusade is crumbling. We came too far, too fast. We came to places where man was not meant to go. We are seeing things that man was not meant to see. We are too far from Holy Terra and the Emperor's Light.'

Again there was that conviction there, the certainty of the fanatic who had no doubts. He might have been a commissar addressing a regiment before an important battle or a martyr preparing to meet his doom in fires stoked by heretics. There was no possibility that he was wrong.

'I had been stationed a few places before we got to Loki – we stopped at all the transhipment points on our way out and I talked to a lot of folks. I like talking and I like listening and I heard some tales that would make your hair stand on end.'

'Like what?'

'Like ghost ships emerging from the warp and destroying our supply craft, enslaving their crews, taking the supplies meant for us and carrying them off to the daemon worlds where the heretics dwell.'

'You always hear such stories,' I said. 'I have been hearing them since I first set foot on a starship over thirty years ago.'

'I know,' said Zachariah. 'But tell me, is this the first time you have believed those stories to be true?'

Again there was no doubt in his voice, only certainty. I *must* believe what

he did. The odd thing was that he was right. Oh, in the past, in moments of doubt and fear when travelling between the stars, I had thought of those old stories. Everybody does. But the Halo Worlds were the first place that I really actually thought it was true when I was not aboard ship.

He nodded, as if seeing something written on my face that confirmed what he was thinking. He kept going like a fighter pressing his advantage in a brawl. ‘The generals all think of rebellion, if they are not already openly rebelling like Richter. What else could that be but the taint of this evil place finding its way into their minds? Why else would they plot and scheme against the greatest hero mankind has known since the time of the Emperor?’

He was tugging at the first finger of his right hand now, counting off points as he made them.

‘Armies, entire Imperial armies, have fallen into heresy. Their generals set themselves up as gods among men, as satraps for old, evil powers. They are crushed and crushed again and still more emerge.’ That was another finger. ‘You have seen that here on Loki.

‘Our armies are falling apart. Our men do not have ammunition. Our vehicles do not have fuel. Among the far stars, the glorified clerks of the Administratum plot against heroes.’ He had reached the penultimate digit.

‘We face more and more monsters, more and more strangeness, and that strangeness is not to be found just among our enemies but among ourselves.’ And he was done.

He sat down on his bed, appearing to have exhausted himself with his tirade. I noticed he was pale and that his eyes were faintly bloodshot. There were spots on his skin that reminded me of something and it came to me that he was very sick.

‘These are times of ill-omen,’ he said, his voice starting to fade, his certainty still there but his body unable to respond to his fanatic’s will. ‘All things will end badly.’

He nodded and slumped down, a wind-up toy that had run out of power. He pulled the sheet over himself and lay still. I turned my head a little so that I could see him, closed my eyes for a moment and I was asleep.

The next morning, when I woke, two Sisters Hospitaller were there. Zachariah’s body was covered with a white sheet. I felt much better and I sat up in bed. I placed a hand on the woman’s shoulder and she turned to

face me, flinching as if she had felt the hand of a corpse on her body.

‘What happened?’ I asked. ‘What happened to Zachariah?’

‘He’s dead,’ she said. ‘I thought that much would be obvious.’

‘I was just speaking to him last night,’ I said.

She looked at me. Her face was pale. Her eyes glittered. There were two spots of colour far up on her cheeks. ‘That’s impossible,’ she said. ‘He died two days ago. We’ve only just picked up the notification to remove the body.’

I stared at her, unsure if she was joking. It swiftly became obvious that she was not and I said no more.

I felt strong enough to take a walk around the wards. There was no one present to object. I was still limping and a little weak and I thought sometimes, out of the corners of my eyes, that I could see those small scuttling daemons.

There were many wounded men there, wrapped in bloody smocks. Some of them were legless. Some of them inspected the stumps where hands had once been with listless, uncomprehending eyes. Some were blind, with bandages wrapped around their eyes. Many lay on their beds, their breath wheezing from their chests, phlegm gurgling in their lungs. Their skins were pale. Their eyes were white. I was reminded constantly of the heretic armies as they advanced. If only there had been the sound of gunfire, many of the noises would have been similar.

As I walked I thought about what the sister had said, about the things I kept seeing out of the corner of my eye. It seemed obvious to me that I was not one hundred per cent recovered, that the fever still gripped me, at least some of the time.

I found myself in a great hallway with a soot-smudged stained-glass window. I looked out of it. Below me I could see dark clouds of industrial gas. From the gas lifted immense chimney towers, tall as starscrapers. In the sides of some I could see glowing windows. Roads ran round them, carrying groundcars ever higher. Aircars flew between them, bearing who knew what loads.

Below me the clouds parted and I caught sight of a vertiginous view, of massive pistons rising and falling on the roof of a structure bigger than a starship. Of more effluent billowing forth. Of a huge wheel, stuck in the

side of a building, turning around and around for who knew what unguessable purpose. I stood there watching and thinking and trying to sort out my thoughts and feelings.

Had I imagined a whole conversation with Zachariah? Was it merely a fever dream conjured up from scraps of overheard conversation by my own imagination or had I really spoken to a dead man? Whether Zachariah had been dream or reality, he had given voice to many points that had troubled me about the state of the Imperium and the state of the crusade.

I batted this back and forth for the rest of a long afternoon and when I returned to my dormitory bed, Ivan was waiting.

'How goes it, Sergeant Lemuel?' Ivan asked with mocking politeness. I slumped down on my bed. I could not help but notice that his prosthetic arm was dented and that the motors whined even more than usual when he used it. He regarded me steadily through one normal eye and one bionic. It was a trick he used to great effect when playing cards.

'Could be better, could be worse,' I replied. 'Anton could be here.'

'Don't let him hear you say that. And in all seriousness, he spent more time by your side than I did when you were unconscious.'

'How long was I out?' I was curious now.

'Almost a week. For a long time there it was touch and go. The medicae thought you were lost a dozen times. That's what they told me.'

'Anton told me that you're guarding the space port.'

'He told you more than he should have then.'

'You know what he's like. Can't keep a secret.'

'Don't tell anybody else you know. The Lord High Commander is in a bad enough mood anyway.' Macharius was not normally a man to lose his temper. He was brilliant at concealing his emotions no matter how badly things went. Or he had been until recently.

'Any particular reason?'

'Any number of them. Take your pick.'

'What would I be choosing from?' I could see what he was up to now. He was going to make me work for any information I got out of him.

'The crusade is bogged down on half a dozen war-fronts.'

'That's happened before. It will recover momentum eventually.'

'There's some sort of conclave of generals scheming to replace him.'

‘There’s always some underling seeking glory.’

‘These ones have the backing of the Administratum, or so Macharius thinks.’ That was not good news. Macharius had a number of powerful enemies among the bureaucrats who ran the Imperium. It was almost inevitable. For most of the past couple of decades he had been the most powerful man in known space. That caused a lot of friction. ‘With everything that has gone wrong they might just be in a position to pull him down. Macharius has a ship on standby to take him to Acheron. That’s where the generals are supposed to be meeting with their supporters.’

‘I would have thought he would have been gone by now. It’s not like him to let any challenge go unopposed.’

Ivan let out a long sigh. ‘There’s still the challenge here on Loki. He’s still obsessed with beating Richter. He won’t give up this world.’

‘He might not have any choice, from what I’ve seen.’

‘Don’t let him hear you say that,’ said Ivan. ‘He has not been kind to those who preach defeatism. That’s what he calls it.’

‘He’s never had any problem with the truth before.’

‘Well, he does now. You can’t say you haven’t been warned.’ Ivan placed a careful emphasis on his words. He wanted me to understand that he was serious. I felt suddenly very tired and I think that weariness showed on my face.

‘Things have changed, Leo,’ Ivan said. ‘He’s not the man he once was. You’ll see when you recover.’

‘I’m not sure I want to recover if things are the way you say.’ I sounded petulant and childish and I knew it. I could not help myself though. I was sick and physically weak and I was beginning to be very frightened.

I had another visitor soon after, although she did not come in the guise of such. I was lying on the bed, listening to the coughing and the screams of pain when a Sister Hospitaller was suddenly standing over me. Her features were very familiar. It was Anna.

‘I thought I saw you before,’ I said. She smiled at me enigmatically.

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ she said.

‘I saw you giving me the serum.’

‘No such serum is available on this world,’ she said. Her face was utterly bland. I knew she was capable of lying with a completely straight face – she

would not blink and her pulse rate would not change. Her entire body had been rebuilt to make her capable of such deceptions and far more.

‘I know it was you,’ I said. I was certain it had been, too, although I could not say why. My senses had been highly unreliable of late.

‘Whether it was or it wasn’t,’ she said, ‘I am glad you are all right.’

And that was as close to an admission as I was ever going to get from her. ‘Why are you here?’ I asked. I wondered if she had been sent to kill Richter. After all, one assassin can succeed where an entire army might not. And the rogue general must be a prime target.

‘You should know better than to ask me that by now,’ she said. She was mopping my brow. It made her look more like a Hospitaller, I suppose, but it made me shiver. It was something between us that she never seemed to lie to me directly, or maybe that was just the impression she wanted to give. I have never been sure.

‘You’re supposed to say you came to see me,’ I said.

‘I did. Today at least.’

‘I’m glad you did.’

‘Your friends have visited you often.’

‘You could have done so too. They would not be able to recognise you if you did not want them to.’

‘I have been busy, Leo.’

‘People have been dying unexpectedly, have they?’

‘I do more than kill people,’ she said. It was almost as if I had criticised her. I have no idea why she should feel offended; she had no more conscience about murder than a cat has about killing mice. ‘I gather intelligence. I report it.’

‘So you have been gathering intelligence then?’ I said.

‘You are an exasperating man.’

‘Apparently so.’

‘Yes. I have been gathering intelligence.’

‘And you cannot tell me about it.’

‘What would you have me tell you?’ She was looking at me directly now and I felt as if, just for a moment, I could ask her anything and I might get an honest reply. There was an unguarded look in her eyes, or so it seemed to me. I looked at her for a long time and the moment passed, and she seemed to be wary of everything and everybody once more.

‘Are you comfortable here?’ she asked.

I looked around ironically at the wounded and the dying. ‘It’s better than where I was before,’ I said. She tilted her head to one side and studied me very intently. She seemed to hear something more in my words than I had intended to put there.

‘You are frightened,’ she said. ‘That is not like you. Why?’

I told her about the dreams. I told her about Zachariah. I told her about the things I had heard. I told her I was starting to doubt my own sanity. While I told her this she held my hand; when someone walked by she appeared to be taking my pulse.

As I spoke, she nodded, as if I were confirming things that she already knew. It was a way she had. Maybe she did already know. Maybe it was just her method of encouraging me to speak. It certainly worked – I babbled as if I had somehow been injected with truth serum. Only later did I wonder if perhaps I had been.

Once I had finished speaking, she said, ‘Speak of these things to no one. Your companion, Zachariah, if companion he was, was correct about that. There are matters here that could get you killed if the wrong person learns of them.’

‘Drake,’ I said. The inquisitor could read my thoughts if he chose to.

‘He has his mind on other things just now.’

‘Why do I need to worry about these dreams?’ I wanted to know and she seemed to be in a position to tell me, even if it was foolish to ask.

‘We have come too far,’ she said. ‘Into a place where Chaos seeps through. It is very strong here. What Zachariah told you is essentially correct.’

‘You are saying we should abandon the crusade, go back?’

‘Perhaps it might have been better never to have come here, but it’s too late for that now.’ It was easy to be wise after the fact, I thought, and she could see it written on my face.

‘We didn’t know,’ she said. ‘We couldn’t until we got here and the reports started coming in. Now we do. We need to pull back. If we do not our armies will become corrupt and our way will be lost. It is already starting to happen. The signs are there for those who can see them. Richter had already raised the standard of rebellion and others will follow him down into the darkness.’

‘You think the crusade will fail then, and Macharius with it.’

‘It does not matter what I think, Leo,’ she said. ‘What matters is what the High Lords of Terra think. They are the ones who give the orders and will ultimately decide success or failure.’

‘History and the Emperor will decide,’ I said.

‘Faith, Leo? From you? At this late date? I always thought you were a cynical man. It is one of your more attractive qualities in this age, in these worlds.’

I remembered what Ivan had said. ‘You think he will be removed?’

It was not necessary to spell out who I meant. ‘There are already plots against him,’ she said. ‘They have failed in the past. Sooner or later one is bound to succeed if there are enough of them.’

I remembered the assassin back on the battlefield and shouting a warning. I told her of him. ‘You think he was not a heretic?’

‘He might have been in their pay or suborned by them, or he might have been working for someone else,’ she said.

‘He was very hard to kill,’ I said.

She considered this for a moment, appearing to turn it over and over in her mind. If she did know something she decided not to tell me. She rose and said, ‘Be wary, Leo. You and your friends are caught in the middle of a great web. The fact that it was not meant to trap you will mean nothing when the spiders come to feed.’

She departed. She had not walked more than a dozen steps when she seemed to vanish amid the people. It was something about her way of walking, her body language. She just blended into the crowd as if she had become invisible.

I lay there feeling the faint lingering warmth of her grip on my hand, wondering if this too was a hallucination.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TEN

A warning klaxon woke me. I sat up too quickly and felt dizzy. I glanced around, wondering what was going on, what the panic was. The constant repetitive blaring sound was a sector callout alarm, the sort that you normally only hear in a hive city when there has been a catastrophic failure of life support systems. If that had happened I was in the worst possible place, garbed only in a medial smock, without weapons or equipment.

Another darker thought occurred to me. The heretics might have broken through; they might have invaded the last bastion of the Imperium on this planet. Our defeat might already have been accomplished.

I looked around to see what I could see. Sisters Hospitaller were moving through the chaos. Their faces showed no emotion but they had been trained to deal with the carnage of the battlefield and not to panic. I noticed a medicae adept moving between the beds. His stride was swift, his manner urgent. I saw fear in his eyes. I pulled myself out of bed and stood in front of him.

‘What is going on?’ I asked. He made to brush by me.

‘I don’t have time for this,’ he said. I put a restraining hand on his shoulder and he shrugged it off. I applied one of the holds I had been taught in basic training. I have got a lot of use out of it over the years. Even in my weakened state I was capable of holding him in place. I could tell from his expression he was finding the experience painful, even as he struggled to break my grip.

‘If you keep this up you will either break your arm or dislocate your shoulder. In fact, I might do that for you.’

He listened to my words for a moment. They seemed to take a few heartbeats to travel from his ear to his brain. He stopped struggling.

‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘Now tell me as quickly and clearly as you can what is going on.’

‘The alarm has sounded.’

‘I know. I can hear it. Tell me why.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Guess.’

‘There are rumours of a heretic army in the streets of Niflgard. Of a new plague breaking out. I’ve been hearing them all day.’

No point in asking why no one had told me. No one tells the patients anything in a place like this. I let him go and he scuttled off, looking backwards over his shoulder, angry and afraid. He was not used to being manhandled. He would not have lasted a minute in the streets of the hive where I grew up.

I walked over to the wall, where the emergency rebreathers should have been kept. The cases were open and they were all gone. I guess they had been stripped away and sent to the front a long time ago. Either that or they had been stolen and sold on the black market.

You can fashion an emergency rebreather against certain types of gas from a sheet soaked in your own urine. Don’t ask me why it works, but it does. I lifted a sheet from my bed and tore it into strips just in case. If I had possessed an alembic I would have prepared some urine as well, but I did not. I stood there for a moment, wondering what was going on. I needed to find out more. If the heretics really had broken through, Macharius would either be counter-attacking or regrouping at the space port for evacuation.

I needed clothing, gear, weapons and equipment. A hospital was not a place to find any of those. I might be able to scavenge scalpels or a surgical chainsaw but that would be about the limit. Still, it was better than nothing.

I was feeling stronger now. Adrenaline has that effect. One minute you might feel weak as a newborn kitten, but if your life is in danger, you can find the strength to wrestle an ork if you need to. I strode past a bed on which a figure lay covered in a grubby white sheet. Poor frakker, I thought. A cold white hand grabbed my wrist.

My response was reflexive. I chopped down with my free hand, breaking the grip, then stepped back. As I did so the figure under the sheet sat up. If it was a joke, I thought, it was being executed with spectacularly bad timing and poor taste.

It was not a joke.

The sheet fell away to reveal a dead man. His skin was grey, not with ill-health but with the chill of death. It was the colour of processed meat ground from bone and gristle in a distant food manufactorum. His eyes were an odd bloody red with that hint of corpse-light green burning in their depths. A slight trickle of greenish pus ran from his nostrils and the corners of his mouth when the body moved.

The corpse wheezed and gurgled not because it was breathing, but because its lungs were being compressed within it by its movements, and then it seemed the phlegm was being forced out.

What I noticed most was the smell. It was as if with every false breath it were emitting the stench of all the putrefaction within its body, all of the pus and phlegm and rotting innards. It was a stench to turn the stomach and sour the heart and I had no rebreather. Just the stink of it paralysed me for the moment it took to get from its bed and grab at me. They say that fingernails still grow after death and this corpse had long ones that bit into my flesh. I grunted with pain and responded as I had been trained to too long ago on Belial.

I lashed out with my foot, catching it between the legs. Its movements were slow and clumsy and it made no attempt to dodge. My kick had no effect. The corpse felt no pain. I had turned its testicles to jelly and got no reaction whatsoever. It was dragging me closer to its foul-smelling mouth. Its teeth were bared as if it intended to bite me. Its face had a look of total, all-consuming hunger.

I brought my arms up inside its grip, my forearms against the internal arc of its elbows. It was strong, but my motion broke its grip and jerked its arms apart at the cost of leaving some of my own skin beneath its fingernails. I pulled at the sheet it had left on the bed, tossed it over the dead man’s head and ran. It did not make any sense to stand and trade blows with something that felt no pain, particularly not when other corpses were rising from beneath their sheets and making a grab for the living.

There were at least a score of them, but they induced a panic

disproportionate to their number amid all those beds crammed with the sick, the dying and those trapped in fever dreams. To many it must have just seemed like another aspect of their nightmare, until they died with the teeth of a walking corpse buried in their jugular.

I needed to find a weapon, any weapon. I saw a medicae adept lying on his back with a dead man on his chest that gnawed at his throat and pulled out his entrails with bloody fingers. On a trolley near at hand were medical implements, including a surgical chainsaw.

Grabbing it meant getting closer to the feasting corpse. I told myself it seemed busy and lunged forward. My action distracted the dead thing from its meal. It looked at me with its reddish eyes. I saw a network of small broken veins within them. Tears of blood spilled down its cheeks and a line of mucus like the trail of some daemon slug dripped from its nose and down over its chin. It wheezed its stinking breath. There were flies all around it. They seemed to have come from nowhere; perhaps they had hatched within its flesh.

I grabbed for the chainsaw. There was no way to find the activating rune quickly so I lashed out, burying the serrated teeth in the dead man's forehead. They bit deep and small fragments of brain and juice flowed out, but he kept coming, reaching for me.

I found the runic activator on the grip and invoked a basic technical chant I had learned when I served on Baneblades all those years ago. By chance or the Emperor's Blessing the blades whirred to life, sending gobbets of flesh and splinters of bone spraying away.

I pushed forward and the blade bit into the skull and passed through, slicing the head in two all the way down to the spine. I twisted at the top of the spinal cord and pulled the weapon free. The dead man dropped like a puppet with its strings cut.

I let out a faint sigh of relief. I had found a weapon that worked and a way of putting the things down. That was the best I could hope for under the circumstances. I turned to look at the medicae but he was most definitely dead, his skin already turning a strange greyish green. He looked not unlike the walking corpse.

A thought struck me. These were not infected heretics who were rising this time, these were our own men. Had the disease mutated again, found a way to jump to the uninfected living and lie dormant until they passed on? If that

was the case the plague was definitely growing stronger and more deadly.

Why now? Why were they all rising at once? Had some dark ritual been performed that caused them all to rise and hunger? I resigned myself to the fact that I would probably never know, that I didn't even really want to know, and looked around to see what I could see.

A group of walking corpses was pressing a Sister Hospitaller back towards the door. The woman was trying to keep them at bay, swinging surgical implements at them, slicing flesh, but the walking dead men paid them no attention. I came up on the group from behind and sliced off heads and limbs with all the élan of a woodcutter chopping down trees. It was a crude technique but it was effective.

The ones with the severed heads fell at once, and the others kept coming until I decapitated them. When I finished I turned to the woman. She stared at me. I could not have been a pretty sight, a tall man in a besmirched medical smock wielding a chainsaw and covered in gore. She reacted pretty well, all things considered.

'Thank you,' the sister said. She was tall and dark-haired, and had a calm beauty that would have aroused my interest under somewhat different circumstances.

More and more dead bodies were rising and not all of them were coming out from under white sheets. The medicae adept whose chainsaw I was wielding came lumbering towards me, as if determined to reclaim the tool of his trade. He was hampered somewhat by the ropes of intestine wrapping themselves round his leg and forming slimy pools at his feet. Behind him came more and more dead people, arms outstretched, tears of blood running down their faces, uncanny hunger burning in their eyes.

The disease had certainly mutated. The dead were rising much more quickly and the plague seemed to be being passed on from the dead to the living, perhaps at the moment of death.

I turned to the woman and said, 'It's time to go.'

She did not need telling twice. We raced towards the elevator. It was already in use. I could see the glowing numbers light in sequence as it approached our floor. More walking dead, I thought. I did not see what else it could be. In this hospital at this moment it was the most likely explanation.

I wondered whether to wait and try to clear the elevator with my chainsaw

or to make a break for the stairs. As I wrestled with the thought, the elevator reached our floor and the doors opened. I brought up the chainsaw and found myself looking down the barrel of a sniper rifle.

‘Typical,’ said Anton. ‘We come all this way to collect him and he greets us by trying to chop our heads off.’

‘It would raise the level of intelligence considerably in your case,’ I said.

‘And then he makes a smart remark. Not even a hello, pleased to see you, thanks for risking your life to save me.’

‘Pleased to see you,’ I said and I was.

‘You might want to save the sentimental reunion for later,’ said Ivan. ‘We have other problems.’

The sniper rifle barked. A walking dead man fell, his head reduced to so many blobs of flesh and brain. This in no way discouraged the others.

I hustled the sister into the elevator while Anton and Ivan fired over my shoulder.

‘I don’t suppose you thought to bring my shotgun,’ I said. The door closed, taking off the hand of a dead man as it did so. It crawled around on its fingers like a great spider until Anton stamped on it with his heavy boot. Then he shrugged his left shoulder. The duffle bag hanging from it dropped to the floor with a metallic crunch, just as the elevator began its descent.

‘Is that what I think it is?’

‘I thought you might be missing your favourite toy. I brought you some cartridges too.’

‘Thanks,’ I said. There was not just a shotgun in the duffle bag. There was a uniform and some combat boots as well.

‘You came well prepared,’ I said.

‘We thought we had better when the reports started coming in,’ said Ivan.

‘Reports?’ I asked.

‘Uprising. The whole city was rebelling, or so it seemed. Only it wasn’t that simple.’

‘When is it ever?’ I said. I pulled off the smock and started fitting on my uniform.

‘It wasn’t the citizens who were rebelling, it was the corpses. A whole bunch of them seemed to up and leave the morgues and go on a killing spree, and the ones they killed decided to join them and soon the whole bloody party was out of hand.’

I thought of what I had seen back in the ward. It seemed like the hospital was one of the last places to be touched. It made a certain sort of sense I suppose. It was warded against disease.

Anton decided to join in the explanation, possibly because Ivan was getting too much attention from the sister. ‘And then, wouldn’t you just know it, the heretics decided to attack. A huge offensive, millions of troops, living and dead, pushed all the way to the city wall, and someone opened the gates for them.’

I pulled on the boots. ‘Sounds like it was all part of someone’s plan,’ I said. ‘General Richter’s, maybe?’

‘They’ve got to get up pretty early in the morning to put anything past you, haven’t they, Leo?’ said Anton.

‘He’s right though,’ said Ivan. ‘It’s all too closely timed for it to be any other way.’

‘I would have thought you would have your work cut out for you defending the space port.’

Ivan looked away. Anton looked at the ceiling and whistled. The elevator kept going down. I adjusted my helmet and then my rebreather. ‘We were off duty when the word came in to pull back, that we’d be taking to the ships in an hour or so.’

‘How long ago was that?’ I asked, while I loaded the shotgun. It felt good to be putting ammo in it again.

‘About half an hour ago.’

‘So what you’re really saying is that you deserted your post to come here and get me out.’

‘It doesn’t sound like such a good idea when you put it like that,’ said Anton. ‘Maybe we shouldn’t have come.’

‘We’d just have been waiting to board a shuttle anyway,’ said Ivan. ‘This is way more exciting.’

Neither of them seemed particularly bothered that they might not be able to get back to the space port in time to escape the impending catastrophic collapse of Niflgard into plague-ridden madness. I was very grateful to them both and I struggled for the perfect words to express my feelings. ‘You’re idiots,’ I said eventually.

‘You’re welcome,’ said Ivan.

The doors opened again. Corpses crawled across the lobby. Some of them

were eating others. Some of them were fighting. All of them looked up with glowing reddish eyes when they smelt fresh meat.

I stepped forward, pumped the shotgun and pulled the trigger.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ELEVEN

In my experience there's nothing that clears a hospital lobby quite like a blast from a sawn-off shotgun. The hail of shot tore through the walking dead, severing a few spines and causing them to fall and not rise again. Many more were blasted off their feet. When they rose, there were holes in their flesh. A few limbs dangled from strips of flesh.

Anton opened fire with his sniper rifle. He was more subtle than me and more effective. Every shot took one of the dead men in the head. Ivan had meanwhile decided that he wanted to try out my chainsaw and I saw no point in objecting. The sister kept behind us as we fought our way out of the building.

The street was like the inside of the hospital only on a larger scale. There were bodies everywhere, many of them moving, some of them armed, and all of them looking hostile and hungry. Their nostrils twitched and their heads turned as we pushed our way through the doors with the former patients, staff and guards in hot pursuit.

Anton had left an open-cockpit groundcar outside the enormous building. Around it were a bunch of dead bodies. I mean really dead, with smashed heads and ripped torsos. I could pretty much reconstruct the route he and Ivan had taken into the hospital from the layout of the corpses. There was a lot of greenish slime strewn around as well.

A roar of engines announced the presence of gunships overhead. They were racing somewhere in the distance. Shortly thereafter we heard the

distant thunder of explosions. I have no idea who was performing airstrikes or what against, but it fed the general atmosphere of chaos and confusion and provided a momentary distraction that let us move a few paces closer to the groundcar.

More and more of the walking dead men were coming towards us. I ran over to the vehicle and jumped in, the others piling in all around me. I heard a scream and saw the sister had tripped and a horde of the dead had set on her in a frenzy. The way her screams suddenly stopped told me she would not be joining us.

I activated the vehicle and the engine roared to life. I pushed it forward aiming directly for the crowd. There was going to be no other way to get through. The balloon tyres screeched. There was a shuddering bump as the first of the corpses impacted on the radiator grille. Another went cartwheeling away from the force of impact. The car wobbled slightly on its suspension as we went over some more corpses.

The walking dead did not care how fast we were moving. They threw themselves at us. Most of them were knocked clear but one of them managed to get itself onto the bonnet of the vehicle and started to climb its way up. Ivan stood on the bucket seat and swept his chainsaw down. It was not the cleverest thing to do under the circumstances. Gore splattered the windscreen. Some of it arced over the armourglass and sprayed us. I flicked the wipers on and leaned to one side so I could see round the murky windshield. It almost cost me my life.

A dead man stood there. I ducked back in just in time to avoid hitting him. The force of the impact would most likely have broken my neck. I could see through the gaps where the wipers had removed the blood now. In the mirrored reflection I caught sight of something climbing over the back. It was the upper half of the corpse that had been thrown beneath the vehicle. Its hips and legs had been torn away, but its arms still functioned well enough.

‘Anton, behind you,’ I shouted. He twisted and stood in the back seat, aimed and fired. The corpse was thrown backwards. We hit a speed bump, probably another corpse, and he teetered forward, almost losing his grip on his gun.

‘Try to be a bit more careful, would you, Leo? You’re not driving a Baneblade now,’ he shouted. Something plunged from an overpass bridge

above us and landed right in the cockpit. It gave a gurgling growl and reached for me. It snagged my arms and sent the steering wheel to spinning left. The groundcar lurched in that direction, racing along a pavement, heading directly towards the wall.

In the confined space of the groundcar cockpit Ivan could not bring the chainsaw to bear without hitting one of us. There was not even a place where he could set it down. He cast it away and it scythed through the air behind us, decapitated the walking corpse of a woman and buried itself in the chest of a huge man who was lumbering along after us.

Ivan grabbed the corpse and pulled it off me. The bionic systems of his arms whined as he struggled with the dead man. It tried to bite him and broke its teeth on the plasteel of his bionic limb. Ivan tugged its arm from its shoulder. It came free with a strange sucking, popping sound and started to wriggle around like a snake, grabbing at the steering wheel.

Ivan somehow managed to pull the rest of the monster clear and toss it over the side. It fell into another crowd of walking dead. The arm, meanwhile, had locked its fingers around the steering wheel and would not let go. I twisted the wheel to the right just in time for us to avoid hitting the wall and found I had aimed the vehicle directly at a lumen column. I kept twisting and the car went into a spin, the great balloon tyres screeching as the whole vehicle started to rotate.

Somehow we missed the lumen column although it scraped the paintwork along the side of the groundcar. We spun almost to a stop. It was a bad place for that. We were now facing back in the direction we had just come, our bonnet pointed right at an onrushing horde of corpses.

‘Well done, Leo,’ Anton said. ‘You sure you don’t want me to drive?’

‘Shut up and keep shooting,’ I said, and executed a three-point turn that almost reversed us into a wall and crushed several more dead bodies.

‘How long ‘til final boarding now?’ I shouted.

‘About twenty minutes, so you might want to put your foot down.’

He wasn’t kidding. It was going to be touch and go. I got us aimed along the road again and accelerated as fast as I could, praying to the Emperor that no more dead men decided to perform feats of acrobatics.

I managed to get us onto the access ramp for the main highway. Overhead a massive airship crashed into the side of a starscraper. I wondered whether

the plague had taken the pilot or whether one of the dead was at the controls.

As I gunned the engine I got a clear view of the streets below the great roadway. The dead were everywhere, fighting with the living. Some soldiers were still holding out, garbed in the uniforms of the local militias. Things were not going to go well for them when the heretics entered the city. They would not go well for us either if we were found here.

The air was cool as it swept by us, though, and my rebreather kept out the worst of the pollution. Anton studied the horizon with his sniper-scope. Ivan sat beside me and stared off into the distance, bionic arm hanging out over the side of the car as if we were out on some pleasure trip.

Ahead I could see the massive forms of the orbital shuttles on the space field. They looked as big as starscrapers themselves. I knew we would need to find a place on one of those. ‘Which shuttle were you assigned to?’ I asked.

‘What does it matter?’ Anton asked.

‘I’m going to drive right up to it and we’re going to dive out and hope someone recognises us.’

‘We’re wearing our uniforms,’ Anton said. ‘What’s the problem?’

I shut up. Maybe he was right. Maybe I was worrying about nothing. But when you’re caught up in a massive retreat through a city being overrun by heretics and hungry dead men you tend to worry about these things.

The road sped by. I weaved through a number of cars that just seemed to have been abandoned or crashed and left to burn. The plague had most likely got to their drivers. Up ahead I saw a roadblock. I looked at the dashboard timer. I reckoned we had fifteen minutes.

The men wore the uniforms of the local militia and they had weapons pointed directly at us. I toyed with gunning the engine and trying to crash through, but it was a risk. They might shoot us and the force of the impact might wreck the groundcar.

I hit the brakes.

‘Where are you going?’

‘The space port,’ I said. ‘Urgent communication for Lord High Commander Macharius.’

They stared at us and our blood-spattered vehicle. I could see they were wondering exactly what was going on. They recognised the uniform,

though, and the voice of authority, so after a few moments of dithering they let us through.

‘Just as well,’ said Anton. ‘I was going to shoot them if they didn’t.’

For once nobody bothered to contradict him. I suspect we had all been thinking the same thing. Up ahead white contrails scarred the sky like the talon marks of some great beast. Even as I watched, the massive squat shape of a shuttle lifted itself into the sky. It was like watching a starscraper take flight.

‘Frakkers are leaving without us,’ Anton said. He meant it to sound like a joke but there was a faint panicked squeak in his voice. ‘Might want to put your foot down, Leo. Shake a leg.’

I was already accelerating, pushing the groundcar up towards the limits of its speed. The roadway here was fairly clear, with less evidence of the plague and the walking dead. My hands felt clammy on the wheel. I was starting to think we might not make it, that we would be stranded in this mad city with an enemy army incoming and no way to escape. I doubted the heretics would be very friendly towards any outworlder they found. I was sure they would find some unclean use for us in their dubious rituals.

There was an odd feel in the air, an ominous expectancy that hovered over the doomed city. The wind carried it through the polluted clouds. It throbbed in the vibration of the great cogwheels whirring on the sides of the starscrapers. The smokestack towers breathed it out along with their freight of effluent. It took me a long moment to realise what it was.

It was the feeling of defeat, that we had been beaten and that we were not going to recover from this. For the first time since we had begun to follow Macharius on his long fiery road across the stars it felt as if we had no hope of victory, that all that was left for us to do was to flee like whipped dogs, tails hanging, and try to get away as far and as fast as we could, leaving the traitorous General Richter in possession of this planet and its vital production facilities.

I watched the road fly by and I tried to absorb it. In all my years I had never really felt it, even when we were surrounded by the hordes of the Angel of Fire back on Karsk. There the Imperial forces had been stabbed in the back and overwhelmed by treachery, but I never doubted that once the Imperium’s full might was brought to bear victory would be ours even if I did not live to see it. I did not feel that way now. We had come too far, lost

too much, perhaps even our sense of mission.

I tried telling myself that I was just recovering from being sick, that I was still weak, that it was just the lows my body was feeling manifesting themselves in my mind, but I knew it was more than that. I felt that the war was lost, and that even just escaping the surface of this blighted world was most likely beyond our grasp.

Naturally I did not share my thoughts with Anton and Ivan. I did not really need to. I could tell from their hangdog expressions that they were feeling exactly the same way.

We reached the gates of the space port. In the distance I could see that there were still scores of shuttles on the ground. Men were still clambering aboard and vehicles were still rolling up the ramps. I could see Guardsmen guiding a few battered Leman Russ tanks with hand signals. A few more of them watched the perimeter guns pointing outwards. I wondered if they had enough ammunition to make good on the implied threat.

I pulled up at the gate. Nervous-looking men in the uniform of the Grosslanders turned their weapons on us. They were white-faced. They knew the hour of evacuation as well as we did – they had not been given the order to withdraw. They were wondering whether they would get off-planet just as much as I was. They had that narrow-eyed, sweaty look that soldiers sometimes get when they know that their line of retreat is fast being closed and certain death is approaching. To their credit, they still stood there.

I gave my name and rank and regiment. Anton shouted the password of the day. Their officer stared at us suspiciously. I knew exactly what he was thinking. It was extremely unlikely that three ragged and blood-spattered heretics would roll up at this late hour, with a story as unbelievable as ours.

In the minute he took to debate this, three of the big ships took off, leaving misty contrails behind them as they shucked off the chains of gravity and left defeat below them. Eventually, after what felt like hours but which could only have been minutes, he waved us through.

I weaved through the traffic as deftly as I could towards the towering shuttle that bore the Lion symbol of Macharius. It was still there, of course. It would not be done for the vessel of the Lord High Commander to be seen to leave while any of his men remained on the surface. Not yet anyway. Not unless things got really desperate.

I heard the sounds of gunfire from the edge of the field and then a massive explosion. I glanced right and saw smoke rising in great towers and then a horde of heretic infantry carriers flood onto the space field through the gap. It appeared the war had reached us even here.

Men were already moving to intercept the heretics before they could reach the great spacecraft. It was an act of desperation. Those soldiers knew that if the enemy reached the spacecraft then none of us would be departing.

I looked at Ivan. He looked away shame-faced. Anton pretended not to notice me either. Neither of them volunteered to go and join in the fighting, so I aimed us towards the *Lion's Pride* and gunned the engine.

The great vessel loomed over us, a tower of ceramite and plasteel, resting on great finned haunches. Most of the blast doors were already closed. Men in green tunics guarded the ramps. I brought the groundcar to a screeching halt and vaulted out, striding confidently towards the shuttle. Men brought lasguns to bear on me. I snapped a salute at the nearest officer.

'Sergeant Lemuel,' I said. 'Reporting fit for duty.'

Anton and Ivan strode up behind me and repeated my performance. The officer shook his head and motioned for us to get up the ramps as quickly as we could.

'We seal and blast in three minutes,' he said. He glanced towards the conflict where the walls had been breached. 'Possibly even sooner.'

The ramp flexed under my weight as I raced up it. At the top I turned and looked out. A massive heretic breakthrough had smashed the space port perimeter. At the edges, ships were already taking fire. Space-toughened ceramite was being blasted by Basilisk shells. Lightning danced down the flanks of one vessel where ancient power conduits leaked. Men lay charred and blackened on the concrete. Clouds of smoke and gas drifted across my field of vision. I stepped into the vessel. A starsailor shouted and pointed, guiding me towards the emergency acceleration couches. I strapped myself down knowing this was going to be a rough liftoff.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWELVE

I strapped myself into the launch-bed, thinking of all the previous times I had done this. Normally it was a simple precaution, but with all the shelling going on there was a very real threat of an emergency take-off. Even as that thought struck me, the whole ship shuddered. A bell-like tone filled the air, as if the ship had been struck with a great hammer.

‘That’s not good,’ said Anton. All around us crewmen were on their knees, murmuring technical invocations and launch prayers. A red light flashed. A warning bell sounded. There was another impact, this time followed by the sound of an explosion. It did not sound at all like the normal launch routine.

‘I think we got on just in time,’ said Ivan. His mechanical voice held no emotion. He at least always sounded calm.

‘I think we’re getting away just in time,’ said Anton and gulped. He glanced around furtively as if realising that what he had just said smacked of cowardice.

Normally I would have taken the opening and used it to attack. This time I kept my mouth shut. His words echoed my own thoughts too closely. The ship shuddered and for a moment I thought the end had come, but it was only the lifters cutting in. I could tell from the vibration that the shuttle was now airborne, climbing up and away from the planet’s surface. I lay there rigid, listening for the small sounds that would tell me that something had gone badly wrong.

‘If that last shell has breached the hull then all the air in the ship might be

evacuated,’ Anton said. He sounded nervous.

‘Bulkheads will close and prevent that,’ said Ivan.

‘Only in the sections not breached. If there’s a hole in the hull we’ll all be sucked out into space even if the rest of the ship remains sealed.’

‘We can’t be sucked out,’ I said. ‘We’re strapped to these couches.’

‘Then we’ll suffocate and flash-freeze. Remember what happened back on the *Tramontane* when that wall blew out?’

How could I forget? We had found bodies frozen so cold that they were like ice blocks themselves. If you accidentally bumped into them bits broke off.

‘As far as I can tell it has not happened yet,’ said Ivan, ‘so why don’t you shut up and worry about it when it happens.’

‘Because I won’t be able to worry,’ said Anton. ‘I will be dead.’

‘Then where’s the problem?’

‘What was that noise?’ Anton asked, turning his head nervously. It was just the all clear, telling us the shuttle had left the planetary atmosphere. I unhooked the harness and stood up, made my way out of the emergency launch chamber and stared out of a small porthole. Beneath me I could see the vast shield of the planet obscuring the lower half of the sky. Green and red clouds drifted over rust deserts and sludge seas of ominous grey. Perhaps it was my imagination, but I could have sworn that I saw small flickers of light below me, as if vast explosions were going off, large enough to be seen from space.

Despite the silence, the shuttle was still accelerating. The great hemisphere shrank to become a ball beneath me. The outline of continents became visible. I felt unutterably weary. I looked at the chrono on the wall, still set to local time. An hour ago I had been among the sick and wounded in the great hospital. Now I was watching the planet recede beneath me. It all had the aspect of a dream.

I felt Anton and Ivan move up to flank me.

‘Well, we lost,’ said Ivan. His voice was utterly flat.

Anton sighed. He would have liked to deny it but he could not.

‘We’ll be back,’ I said. I did not sound very convincing, even to myself.

Macharius looked weary. It would not have been visible to many but it was to me. I had known him for a very long time, stood guard over him on a

hundred worlds. It was evident to my eye as soon as I resumed my bodyguard duties.

There was something about him that suggested the old man he in fact was. It was not his body. The juvenat treatments still kept him slim, tall and athletic, muscular as a warrior god. His hair was still golden. His eyes were still clear. When he strode across the room there was still the same look of electric purpose to him that he had possessed when I had first seen him three decades ago on Karsk.

It was something about the set of the shoulders perhaps. They were not so firmly straight. There was the suggestion of a stoop as well, of a head often held downcast.

The grip he clapped on my shoulder was just as firm as it had ever been, and the way he guided me across the chamber was just as forceful as it ever was. There were more lines around his eyes, perhaps, and on the flesh of his hands. There were a few more scars, barely visible. Macharius always healed well. In this, he was fortunate.

‘You are recovered, Lemuel,’ he said. The tone of his voice was compelling but it seemed to have lost something, the certainty it had always had. It did not quite command belief the way it once did. Or perhaps it was just my own imagination and my own feelings of depression.

‘Yes, sir,’ I said.

‘It pleases me that you are fit for duty,’ he said. To his credit, he did sound pleased. It was not just something he was saying because it was expected. He was a man who had conquered sectors of the galaxy for the Imperium. He could say what he wanted to whomever he wanted.

I looked around the chamber. It was oddly familiar, filled with furnishings that I could remember seeing many times before, mementoes of scores of campaigns, the battle banners of a hundred defeated foes. There was a rune-embossed chainsword he had picked up on Silvermount and the helmet of the Amir of Peshtar, crowned with the Star of Pesh, birthright of a world’s rulers for a hundred generations. There was a desk carved from the tip of a Leviathan tusk on which sat a regicide set made from the resonant woods of Kal, whose colour responded to the mood of the player when he touched them.

Macharius looked at me again and said, ‘I wanted to thank you for saving my life back on Loki. I would decorate you again but you’ve enough

braiding already.’

One more would always be nice, I thought, but I did not say anything. It was clear Macharius was not in the mood to be giving medals, even for saving his life. There was a grimness about him I had not seen before. He gestured that I should take a seat. I knew then what was coming.

Throughout his career Macharius had made a habit of talking with his common soldiers about the campaign. It was not really the trait of an Imperial general. It was the style of the planetary nobility amongst whom he had come of age, of men used to talking with trusted retainers.

‘Tell me about Loki,’ he said. His strange golden eyes focused on me. He assumed a posture of intent listening and I will say one thing for him, he did listen. He made you feel as if he had no other interest in the world at that moment but what you were saying.

Under the circumstances, in the face of such flattery, it would take a better man than I not to talk loosely. As I spoke he nodded and tilted his head to one side. It was clear that he was not judging, that I was expected to tell him what I felt honestly, man to man, two old comrades speaking the truth. Except, of course, that I was doing all the talking and he was doing all the listening.

I told him all about the trenches and the walking corpses and the strange things I had seen. He occasionally asked a question, requested more details, a clarification of some point I had made. It was always germane though, always showed that he had been following what I said very closely. I somehow found myself talking about my strange dreams, and the daemons I had seen, and for the first time I noticed a faint widening of his eyes. His fingers flexed and drummed against his thigh for a moment and then stopped as if he too had become aware of what he was doing and what he was revealing.

I told him about waking up in the hospital, about Anna and Zachariah. I repeated the things that were said as closely as I could remember them, even the things unflattering of him and critical. He just nodded and listened and I kept going until I had finished the full tale of our escape.

Only once it was done and he had risen from his chair did I realise the full appalling extent of all I had said. I had criticised the great man to his face, or I had repeated others’ criticisms of him, which to some officers would be the same thing. I had spoken aloud things that many would have construed

as heretical to a man who was sworn to uphold and extend the Emperor's law wherever he stood.

I held my breath, surprised, as I always was after such conversations, at exactly how big my mouth was and exactly how much trouble I was capable of getting myself into. And I had the cheek to call Anton stupid.

I watched Macharius, closely aware that even now he might be contemplating orders that would lead to my swift execution. He simply looked at me and said, 'I appreciate your frankness, Lemuel, but you must say nothing of these things to anyone other than Inquisitor Drake and myself.'

He walked over to the regicide board and I could see that he had set up a position there, or perhaps he was playing against himself. Certainly there was no one else in the army who could have played against him and provided any sort of challenge, not even Inquisitor Drake. His hand hovered over a piece and just for a moment he looked something I had never seen him to be before. He looked indecisive and then he looked angry.

'At every turn, I am thwarted, it seems,' he said. I did not say anything. I did not know whether he was talking to himself or to me. I kept very still, and made my mind blank, pretending to be nothing more than a piece of furniture. 'And it seems once again the Dark Powers are raised against me.'

He looked over at me. I don't know whether he was trying to gauge my response or whether he expected me to say something. I kept very quiet. 'There is something on Loki,' he said. 'Something old and dark and evil. Something that stands behind Richter's shoulder and whispers to him.'

He put a world of loathing into the name Richter. I could understand that. He was talking about the man who had betrayed him after all, a former friend and pupil who had also beaten him in battle, and one thing Macharius was not used to was defeat. He strode over to the porthole and looked down. The world was still below us. In the distance I could see Imperial ships exchanging fire with the planetary defences. The flare as they unleashed their ordnance was visible against the blackness of space.

He looked down at the world below as he had looked down at the game board, with a savage intensity, as if he were confronting a foe with whom he was about to engage in bitter personal combat, against whom he was about to fight a duel to the death. I followed his gaze as it turned towards the moons, as if refusing to invest with any significance the world where he

had been beaten.

‘I have his measure now,’ Macharius said. ‘I have its measure. I will return and I will be victorious.’

His voice had all of the power that had once held armies enthralled in its spell, but there was something missing, I thought, some inner note of conviction that would have given it the old magic and convinced me of his invincibility. To me, at that moment, it sounded as if Macharius was trying to convince himself.

‘Are you sure?’ Macharius asked Inquisitor Drake, when he brought his news. I kept my gaze fixed over his shoulder. I could see my face reflected a dozen times in the mirrored visors of the inquisitor’s storm trooper bodyguards. I saw Macharius too and I was sure that he was aware of me as I stood by his shoulder. It was a position of privilege, awarded only to the most trusted of house troopers.

The inquisitor looked long and hard at the general. He was not a man who was used to being questioned in such a way even by the most powerful man in the Imperium. His normally impeccable self-control was being tested. Knowing Macharius, this was possibly quite deliberate, but I was not so sure – circumstances were unusual. Eventually Drake nodded.

‘I am sure. It has been confirmed by multiple sources. Three of your highest-ranking commanders are already on Acheron. It is only a matter of time and the vagaries of interstellar travel before the others arrive there.’

For the first time ever I saw a look of utter fury on the face of Macharius’s distorted reflection. His fist clenched, crushing the metal goblet he held. Wine slopped over his fingers. A servant moved discreetly into place to mop it up. Macharius motioned him away with a flick of his hand, the sort of motion you would use to brush away a fly. He rose from his throne and moved down the dais until he stood directly in front of Drake. The two men were of the same height but somehow Macharius managed to make the other man look small.

‘Why would they do this? They must know they cannot get away with it.’

‘Must they?’ Drake’s voice was flat, calm and emotionless. He was not afraid of Macharius even though at that moment he appeared the focus of the Lord High Commander’s rage.

‘They are plotting behind my back. They have convened to replace me.

They…’ He paused for a moment, as if he could not quite force the words out.

‘If you rush there you will find that it is a meeting convened by Cardinal Septimus. Word was sent informing you but somehow the messenger never reached you–’

‘Do they really think I am so stupid?’

‘There will be documentation, incontrovertible proof, that the message was sent, that through no fault of the cardinal you were unaware of the meeting. What are you going to do? Call him a liar? Execute a representative of the High Lords of Terra?’

‘I might.’

‘Now you are being foolish. That would merely give your enemies what they want. It would prove that you saw yourself as greater than the Emperor’s representatives, that you plan to set up your own realm here on the far marches of the Imperium, that all the things that have been whispered about you are true.’

‘I am not sure I like your tone, inquisitor.’

‘Like it or not I am merely doing what I have always done, telling you the truth, although it may not be pleasant to hear.’

Macharius paused at that and suddenly he smiled and looked more like the old Macharius. He knew that Drake was not his real enemy, that the men he was angry with were out of his reach and likely to remain so.

‘So it has finally come,’ Macharius said. ‘They have finally found the courage to move against me.’

Drake shrugged. ‘We both knew it was bound to happen. You’ve made too many enemies, ruffled too many feathers. Too many people want to share in the glory.’

‘Richter must be defeated. An example must be made to all future rebels.’

‘Is it more important that you defeat one insignificant foe on a flyspeck world or that you remain in charge of the crusade?’

Macharius stared at him. He looked as if he were about to say something. His fist clenched and he closed his eyes for a second as if breathing a prayer to the Emperor. Whether he was asking for patience or inspiration, I could not tell.

‘What do you intend to do about this challenge?’ Drake asked. His eyes met the Lord High Commander’s and did not blink.

Macharius remained silent for a moment. ‘What I have always done. Fight!’

And so we were ordered to Acheron and another fight that seemed impossible to win. This time with the representatives of the Imperium and those who had once been Macharius’s most loyal followers.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ships filled the sky over Acheron Prime. It was hard to believe there were so many in existence, and it made me realise the full extent and power of the crusade. Here there was no sign of the long, grinding defeat we had known on Loki. Here, the full majesty of the Imperium was evident.

Acheron Prime itself was a vast half-empty city, built amid the ruins of some xenos civilisation on the far edge of the galaxy. Old dark towers loomed over shiny new human buildings. The mix gave the city the look of a regicide board, zones of dark and zones of light intermingled in its architecture.

If the leaders of those conspiring against Macharius were discommoded by his sudden appearance, they gave no sign of it. We were greeted on the edge of the space field by assembled regiments from two score worlds. They raised a thunderous cheer as the doors of the shuttle opened. Macharius raised his hands and waved at the assembled crowd. He turned to Drake.

‘There are at least twenty regiments of Guard down there who should be elsewhere.’ His tone was low and urgent. I think in his head he was making calculations. He had brought with him only his own personal guard and the remnants of the Grosslanders who had been evacuated from Loki.

At first I thought he was considering using these troops to return there and defeat Richter, but as we walked down the ramp in the chill air of the haunted world, it struck me that he might be considering something else. If it came to a battle we would be greatly outnumbered. I pushed those

thoughts aside as I came down the steps. I felt the tug of a new world's gravity, slightly stronger than the Imperial standard of the ship. It made my limbs feel heavier, and it increased my sensations of weariness.

I studied the men who were assembled to greet us, knowing that before me lay an index of those who had conspired to replace Macharius. If they felt the slightest embarrassment it did not show on their faces.

General Tarka looked resplendent in his Hussar's uniform. Piercing icy-blue eyes looked out of his lean, severe face from beneath bushy eyebrows, and his thin narrow mouth was drawn in a tight smile beneath his clipped moustache. He wiped away a speck of imaginary dust from his dress uniform's sash. He could not have held himself any taller and straighter than he did but he gave the impression of suddenly being on parade.

Beside him General Arrian gazed up at Macharius's approach with his bright, mad and fanatical eyes. He was a man who believed in the crusade still beyond any shadow of a doubt. The question was whether he still believed in its leader and the answer, given his presence here, was most likely no.

Looming over the pair like a starscraper over a domestic hab-block was General Cyrus, so tall he looked almost like a mutant, although you would not have said that from a distance. His body was perfectly proportioned. His face looked like it was carved from a block of granite and his eyes were like chips of grey stone.

In his shadow, as if he sought to remain out of sight, there was General Crassus, a man of medium height, almost as broad as he was tall. In the intervening years since I had last seen him, he had put on some weight around the belly and acquired a number of new chins. His face was pockmarked and a scar ran from his brow to the corner of his mouth. There was something about the man that drew the eye despite his attempt to blend in with his companions, an aura of power, of ruthless intelligence, that told you that he was dangerous.

Off to one side, surrounded by a guard of honour, stood another group of robed dignitaries representing the great Administratum of the Imperium. The two groups stood conspicuously apart as if they were having nothing to do with each other. Smiling affably, Macharius advanced to meet them. All of the officers saluted crisply, a gesture Macharius returned with perfect punctilio.

The head of the cabal from the Administratum strode towards Macharius and bowed. It was a complex, ambiguous gesture and it served to remind everyone that he was not part of Macharius's command. He was another tall man, with glossy dark hair going grey at the temples and a small spade beard. His eyes were of such a dark brown they seemed almost black. Three floating skulls orbited his body at shoulder height, a mark of his status, a badge of his power. And those skulls were something more. They were repositories of knowledge and advisors of great cunning.

'Lord High Commander,' said the cardinal, in a rich, rolling bass voice. 'I am pleased to make your acquaintance at long last.'

Macharius's glance was cold and measuring. 'And you are…'

'I am Cardinal Septimus,' said the newcomer. 'As I explained in my message–'

'I received no message from you.' Macharius paused to look pointedly at his generals. 'Or anyone else.'

'But I assumed you were here because you received my invitation.' Cardinal Septimus gave a very good imitation of a man being flustered by unexpected events. If he had not been who he was I might even have believed it.

'I came because I had received reports of my commanders gathering here on Acheron and I wondered what could be so important as to detain them from their duties to the Emperor and the crusade.'

'Alas,' said the cardinal, 'I fear I am to blame for that. I sent the Imperial summons to all of your generals and yourself.' He paused and added with just a hint of irony. 'Clearly some of my messengers have been delayed as the one to you was.'

'So you have summoned me here,' Macharius said. His tone was mild. Only a fool would have assumed that he was anything but dangerous and I doubted the cardinal, despite his manner, was a fool.

'I believe you are still subject to the commands of the Emperor and his chosen representatives,' said Septimus. There was steel in his voice. 'You are a great hero of the Imperium, Lord High Commander.'

He glanced at the skulls floating around him. For a moment, as if subject to some unheard command, their circling ceased and their eyesockets all turned to regard Macharius. My hand went to the shotgun, just in case. 'Once these too belonged to heroes of the Imperium.'

He let the words hang in the air for a moment then said, ‘Are you still subject to the commands of the Emperor and his representatives?’

Utter silence descended. Everyone stood absolutely still, straining to hear Macharius’s response. There could only be one answer to that question which would not result in civil war, a thing Macharius had spent his whole life ending.

Macharius smiled at the cardinal and said, ‘You bear tokens proving you are who you claim to be.’

‘My messenger carried documents marked with the appropriate seals.’

‘We have already ascertained that your messenger never reached me.’

‘Then I can present you with my credentials when we have returned to my palace.’

‘Your palace?’

‘I have requisitioned a fitting domicile for myself and my staff,’ said the cardinal.

‘Perhaps you would be good enough to present them to me in person,’ said Macharius. The two men stared at each other, locked in a battle of wills. ‘At your earliest convenience.’

‘Of course,’ said Cardinal Septimus, after the lapse of ten very long heartbeats. ‘It would be my pleasure.’

Macharius nodded as if he had expected nothing less and swept ahead, through the massed ranks of troops, leaving the generals and the Imperial dignitaries to follow in his wake.

The airship carried us over the ancient city towards the palace that had been prepared for Macharius. I watched the city slide by through the portholes while I eavesdropped on the conversation of my betters. Starscrapers that resembled great ebony tombstones drifted by. Alien runes appeared on their sides and vanished with no apparent reason. Black flames danced through the sky overhead. In the shadows of these monstrous xenos artefacts the human buildings seemed smaller, shabbier and more impermanent.

Many of them had an abandoned half-complete look that showed how recently they had been put up. It had been the intention to make Acheron the capital of the newly created sector. Its strategic position across the interstellar routes made it suitable as such. Now I doubted the city would ever be complete.

Beneath us I could see vast makeshift camps containing the forces of the generals. Around the edges were parked Baneblades, Shadowswords and other Imperial armour. There was no sign here of the shortages we had known on Loki. I recalled Macharius's suspicions of a conspiracy against him and the gathering of generals here had proved that correct. I wondered if he was correct, too, about supplies being withheld and the supply chain being sabotaged. He was a man who made few mistakes about such things.

'We can't assume that just because they are not here they are loyal,' Drake was saying. His voice was low, urgent, pitched for the ears of Macharius. 'They may, as Septimus says, simply have not gotten the message.'

'Or they may be lying low, afraid to commit themselves, until they see what happens.'

'Equally you cannot assume that just because they are here the officers present are against you. It is difficult to ignore a direct summons from the Imperium.'

'Particularly if one is ambitious,' said Macharius. There was a note of irony in his voice. 'Tell me what you know about Septimus.'

'What does anyone really know about a man like him?'

'I am sure you can tell me more than common scuttlebutt. I am sure your network of agents has been busy here for some time.'

'He is a powerful, clever, ambitious man,' Drake said.

'The fact that he holds the position he does tells me as much,' said Macharius. 'The Imperium would not have sent a fool here.'

'He will not thank you for making him present his credentials to you.'

'What was I supposed to do? Take him at his word?'

'You could have been more diplomatic.'

Macharius shrugged. 'How do you think this will be played?'

'You will be sent home, summoned to Terra, loaded with honours.'

'My work is not done.' Macharius sounded completely convinced of that.

'Clearly there are those in the Administratum who feel differently.'

'If I am replaced no one will be able to rein in Tarka and his ilk. The crusade will disintegrate as they try to achieve their ambitions unfettered. Give them a decade and they will tear the army apart – it will be the Schism all over again.'

'You cannot be sure of that.'

'I picked those men. I have commanded them for decades. Believe me, I

know them and have done so since I humbled every last one of them on the battlefield.’

‘There are some would say that was a flaw in your plan,’ said Drake. He was not a man afraid to put forward opinions that might have got someone else shot. ‘A bid to make yourself irreplaceable. Some would say it was a sign of a lack of humility, of disloyalty to the Imperium even.’

‘Some would say, inquisitor? What would you say?’

‘I am just setting out the arguments that will be used against you. Septimus will be able to present himself as just someone seeking to sort out a succession crisis.’

‘In order for there to be a succession, I would have to die.’

‘You are planning on becoming immortal, are you?’

‘I am not planning on dying any time soon.’

‘Has it occurred to you that there may well be others who are planning on your death?’

‘People have been doing that since I was eleven years old. I am still here.’

‘You won’t be forever. No man can be.’

‘Has it occurred to you, inquisitor, that there are those who would profit by the return of the old Chaos, of a new Schism?’

‘Yes. That is why I think some of your command decisions have been unwise.’

Macharius laughed. ‘I found those men leading armies that had conquered scores of worlds. They swore loyalty to me. They are the best generals in the Imperium for the kind of war we are fighting. It was not simply vanity and megalomania that made me choose them. They chose themselves. Of all the men in all the worlds, they are the ones who had survived and been victorious. They have conquered more worlds for the Imperium than any men since the time of the Emperor.’

Drake nodded. Macharius clearly had a point. ‘You could have replaced them.’ He was not about to give up.

‘With men just as violent, just as ambitious and perhaps less competent? You don’t get to be an Imperial general by being a herbivore, inquisitor. You didn’t survive on the killing grounds of the Schism by being the toughest sheep in the herd. You survived by being a wolf.’

‘And now your pack is turning on you.’

‘You have made your point.’

‘I hope so.’

‘You think we are approaching a point where I may be of more use to the Imperium as a dead hero than a live general?’ There was a trace of mocking humour in Macharius’s voice.

‘I am sure there are some who might.’

‘They will change their minds when I have dealt with Richter.’ Once again it was there in Macharius’s voice, that note of querulous obsession. He seemed to have convinced himself that overcoming his nemesis would put everything right, would regain any lost prestige, would make things as they once were. Could he really not see how broken things were?

‘I have had my people sweep your palace. It is clean, as far as they can tell.’ That meant that it was as secure as was mortally possible.

‘That is always good to hear,’ said Macharius. I knew he had his own people checking as well, just in case. I would see reports about it soon enough.

The airship docked with Macharius’s palace.

We accompanied the general to his penthouse chambers and were dismissed.

Knowing there would only be a short respite before the tidal wave of generals and bureaucrats descended on us, we headed down towards the apartments that had been assigned to us. All around an army of servants went about their business, padding through the marble-walled corridors, clad in green tunics, carrying themselves with the bearing of ancient aristocrats. Here at least were those who were still in no doubt of Macharius’s status. His glory reflected on them and they looked the part.

‘I wonder what they all do when we’re not around,’ Anton said as we strode past another arrogant-looking houseboy.

‘The palace does not look after itself,’ Ivan said. ‘They still have duties to perform.’

‘Aye, and food to eat and wine to drink, while we’ve been out in the trenches killing heretics.’ Anton sounded bitter in a way I had never heard him before.

‘What’s got into you?’ I asked. Behind his head, through a great arched window, I could see a mirrored black starscraper. On its side pictoglyphs formed and faded, spelling out some unguessable message in a tongue long

lost to mankind.

‘Nothing,’ said Anton. His lips were compressed tightly. His scar looked livid on his forehead. His eyes were narrowed at their corners.

‘You sound angry,’ I said, just to goad him.

‘I am not angry.’

‘Petulant, then.’

‘I am not petulant.’ Of course, denying it made him sound exactly that.

‘He’s just annoyed there was no victory parade,’ said Ivan. ‘There’s always been a victory parade before.’

‘I am not worried about any sodding parade,’ said Anton.

‘It’s the lack of cheering crowds then. You miss them.’

‘I don’t give a toss about crowds, cheering, booing or otherwise.’

‘Then why are you so annoyed?’

‘It’s them…’ Anton said. We paused in front of a mural depicting yet another of Macharius’s triumphs. In this one, as in so many others, he was accompanied by his most important generals, each head of one battlegroup of the crusade. They were all there: Sejanus, Tarka, Crassus, Arrian, Fabius, Lysander and Cyrus. All of them looked only marginally less a supreme commander than their great leader.

‘Them?’

‘The generals, the nobles, the politicians, the high muckety-mucks.’

‘What about them?’

‘Yeah, what about them?’ Ivan asked. ‘They’ve always been frakkers. Why have you picked today to notice it?’

‘They’re talking about replacing Macharius. You heard what Drake said… It’s treason.’

‘It would only be treason if they were plotting against the Imperium,’ I said.

‘They’re plotting against Macharius.’

It hung in the air. I looked over my shoulder to see if anyone was listening. No one looked like it, but that meant nothing. In a palace like this half the servants were probably in the employ of someone or other, reporting back every word they heard.

‘Macharius is not the Imperium,’ I said. Was it my imagination or did one servant girl’s eyes widen slightly? I doubted that she could understand the dialect of Belial but you never know – if someone wanted to place an agent

badly enough they might find someone who could.

‘What have all those other frakkers ever done for the Imperium?’ Anton asked.

‘Led its armies to victory.’

‘I am talking about the bureaucrats who stayed at home and counted their money while we fought and bled over half the galaxy.’

I said nothing. I looked at him disapprovingly, more for discussing this where we could be overheard than because I disagreed with what he was saying. The servant strolled off down the corridor. I told myself it must have been my imagination.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Drunken Ratling was a new tavern pretending to be old. It was in a basement bunker deep beneath one of those old black, mirrored starscrapers. Its walls were covered in murals of Imperial Guardsmen winning great victories in the face of orks, eldar, and a bunch of equally strange-looking xenos the likes of which I had never seen before and which most likely came direct from the imagination of some artist.

The place was full of men in uniform, drinking grog and pivo and brown beer. Hundreds of uniformed soldiers sat at long tables and clutched steins and jabbered at each other in the tongues of their home world. Anton and Ivan and I were no different. We spoke in Belial Hive dialect even though we had less and less use for it down the years. Most of Macharius's guard came from his home world or had been co-opted in from other regiments when they had distinguished themselves in the service of the crusade. Still, it was nice sometimes to speak the old tongue and tell the old jokes and reminisce about a world that none of us had seen for thirty years or were ever going to see again. Sometimes it was good to be reminded of our youth, when life had seemed so simple.

We grabbed a corner table and a serving girl brought us the local beer, a very dark brew that fizzed slightly on the tongue as if there were some strange chemical in it or the water it was brewed from. I raised my glass and spoke a toast to the cog manufactorums of Belial and all those who laboured in them, and Anton and Ivan echoed it. We slopped a small

libation onto the table in memory of all those who had fallen beside us on Loki. I don't know where we had picked that habit up, but it seemed to take on more and more meaning as the years passed. We had seen a lot of faces pass and a lot of comrades fall and it seemed appropriate somehow to mark their passing even in such a small way.

I stared through the clouds of lho-stick fug and soma fumes. All around me were soldiers who seemed more subdued than normal, and I noticed that many of them were slipping furtive glances in our direction. One or two of them were even pointing at us and sniggering. I did not think too much of it at the time. In any large drunken gathering there're always going to be a few who behave like idiots.

'You remember when we found Corporal Hesse asleep under Old Number Ten?' Ivan was saying. 'Now there was a man who could snooze under any circumstances.'

'A valuable skill in a soldier,' I said, taking another sip from my beer. It fizzed on my tongue. I saw one lad glance at me, nudge his mate with his elbow and then laugh. He was wearing a uniform with a lot of gold braiding on it. The buttons of his elaborate coat looked as if they might be made of gold. Most likely they were just plated, although some soldiers like to carry their wealth on them in easily transportable, easily visible fashions. Me, I think it just sets you up as a target for thieves.

'Not as valuable as drinking,' said Anton. 'Being able to hold your booze is a talent to be admired.'

'You're talking to the man who tried to outdrink a Space Wolf,' said Ivan. That was something the pair of them were quite clearly never going to let me forget.

'I played my part heroically,' I said.

'I still remember you throwing up in an old helmet the next day.'

'That's a clear misrepresentation of the facts,' I said.

'True,' said Ivan. 'It wasn't a helmet. It was a bucket.'

'Obviously you are both jealous because you lack my prowess,' I said, taking a deeper swig from the beer, 'which commands the respect even of Space Marines.'

It was a slight exaggeration, but neither of them had been present at the banquet in which I had made the mistake of accepting a drink from Ulrik Grimfang of the Space Wolves. I could tell them anything I wanted, but it

seemed best to keep things within the bounds of probability.

‘You think we are ever likely to see Space Marines again?’ Anton asked. He sounded suddenly like a young lad again, keen to get off-planet and meet the legendary heroes of the Imperium.

‘We’ve already met them more times than most Guardsmen will ever encounter them in a lifetime.’

‘Ten lifetimes,’ Ivan corrected.

‘A thousand,’ said Anton, not wanting to be left behind in the exaggeration. He banged his glass on the table to emphasise the point. Some of it spilled out, slopped along the table and dripped down onto the highly polished boots of a soldier who was standing there.

Perhaps ‘looming there’ would have been a better description. He was a huge man, almost as big as an ogryn, with a massive walrus moustache and a bald head. He had lamb-chop whiskers and a ruddy face and tiny eyes of porcelain-blue that looked out at the world with a slightly insane glaze. Beside him were the young man and his mate who had been giggling at us earlier. Behind them was a group of soldiers all in the same elaborate gold-braided uniforms.

‘Watch what you’re doing,’ said the moustached giant in accented Imperial Gothic.

Anton looked at him. ‘What did you say?’

‘I said, “Watch what you are doing”.’

Anton looked at me then looked back at the giant. I could not help but notice that he had arms as large around as my thighs and fists the size of small ham hocks. ‘Could you repeat that?’ Anton said, putting a hand to his ear. ‘I can’t understand a word of your turdkicker accent.’

He didn’t use the exact word turdkicker, but the Belial equivalent. The sergeant clearly did not understand the word but he understood the tone.

‘I don’t like you, greencoat. I don’t like your attitude.’ His voice boomed out and his words cut through the general babble. Heads turned to look at us. A few men smiled. A few cracked their knuckles. I noticed that there were a lot more men from the giant’s regiment than there were from ours.

‘There’s no need for any trouble,’ said Ivan. His voice was as flat and emotionless as it always was. The sight of his sharp mechanical teeth was enough to give anyone pause.

‘Scared we’ll kick your ass?’ said the laughing youth. ‘Just like the

heretics on Loki did.’

I considered his appearance and I realised that there was something about his face that really made me want to punch it.

‘It’s good you’ve brought twenty friends to back you up,’ said Anton. ‘Always makes rats braver.’

The laughter stopped and a look of pure vicious spite passed across his face. I knew that he was one of the sort that was always stirring up trouble. ‘I’m not scared of you,’ he said.

‘Of course you’re not,’ said Anton. ‘That’s why you brought your big buddy here to hide behind while you shoot your mouth off.’

That was a reasonable shot and things might have calmed down but he could not resist adding, ‘And he looks stupid enough to let you do it.’

‘He’s not the only stupid one around here,’ I said. Unfortunately the giant heard me.

‘What did you say?’ he asked. His tone told me that he did not suspect me of passing any compliments. Behind him I recognised a group of men in green tunics approaching. They all had the tall golden look of warriors from Macharius’s home world. There were not as many of them as there were of our new friends but the odds had changed a little.

I took a deep breath and I thought about what I was seeing. No one, but no one, had tried to pick a fight with us in a bar since we put on the green tunics. We’d picked a few ourselves, but it just was not done to show disrespect to the Lord High Commander’s personal guard. Only now apparently it was. More than anything else this told me how much Macharius’s star had fallen.

At that moment, the giant took a swing at me. It was sudden and it was fast. It might have taken my head off as well, if Ivan had not reached across and caught his wrist. The servo-motors in his arm screeched as he halted the blow and the two of them stood there straining across the table. The smirking youth took it upon himself to break a glass at this point and try to slash me with the splinters. I rolled back off the bench and when I picked myself up I could see a full-scale brawl was in progress, spreading across the room, involving the gold-braids, the green tunics and everybody else. By the time the chaos had reached the edge of the room no one had any idea of who was fighting or why. They were just joining in for the fun of it or to make sure no one got the drop on them.

Ivan stood straining with the giant, his mechanical limbs matched against enormous strength. Smirking youth took a slash at him. The splinters of glass ripped his uniform and revealed the plasteel and ceramite beneath the tunic. I decided I had had enough of this. I raised my glass and threw it at Smirker's head. It tumbled through the air, spilling beer as it went, and caught him right between the eyes, sending him toppling back onto the floor.

'Waste of good beer, that,' said Anton. He jumped onto the table and head-butted the giant, dropping him.

'Thought you were taking too much time with that one,' he said and dived into the brawl. There was nothing else to do but follow him.

The cells were small and dark and dim and full of men who all looked the worse for wear. A single glow-globe flickered overhead. Duty guards looked at us through the visors of their riot helms. I had learned a respect for them and their nightsticks a couple of hours back when they had broken up the brawl and thrown us all into the cells to cool off.

'Just think,' said Anton. 'We'd still be drinking beer if Leo here could hold his temper. He had to go starting brawls.'

'I seem to remember I was not the one who insulted the big bald fellow,' I said.

'Classic – trying to weasel out of responsibility for his actions. How you ever made sergeant is beyond me,' he said.

'Now that I can believe,' I said. 'You certainly don't have the intelligence to understand how I did it.'

'See what I mean – can't resist the sarky remarks. Always causing trouble.'

'It was a good fight though,' said Ivan.

'You're only saying that because you broke that big guy's arm when he grabbed you,' Anton said.

'And I would have broken his jaw if you hadn't nutted him,' Ivan said.

'He deserved it and so did his buddies,' said Anton with a sudden change of tone. 'He was disrespectful to our fallen comrades on Loki. And we did not get our asses kicked.'

I let out a long sigh. I did not see any other way of explaining our precipitate withdrawal from Loki but I was not going to say that out loud. I

was starting to sober up a little and thinking you never knew who might overhear you and how they might choose to interpret it.

'Not tonight anyway,' I could not resist saying. 'We taught them a lesson.'

I glanced around. Most of the men in the cells with us wore green tunics. The duty guards knew better than to put men from different regiments together. Too much chance of a killing if the brawl restarted. I did not know any of them, but I was glad they had been there and taken our side in the fight. Of course, under the circumstances, there was very little else they could have done.

The door opened and an officer strode in. I recognised his tall, upright figure and his blank-seeming expression. It was the Undertaker. He walked right down to the door of our cell as if he knew exactly where to find us. Beside him were a couple of guards.

'Sergeant Lemuel,' he said, 'you are in trouble.'

I saluted him as he indicated the doors should be opened and we should be released.

I did not expect to be taken straight to Inquisitor Drake. I was shown into his office and the Undertaker departed.

'Brawling, Sergeant Lemuel? I expected better of you.' Drake's voice was dry. There was a faint hint of disapproval in it but something else as well, a note of curiosity that made me even more cautious.

'As you have every right to, sir,' I said, doing my best to sound contrite.

'Tell me what happened,' he said. I did so, all the while wondering why this powerful man was taking an interest in a tavern brawl. I am not sure whether he read my mind or simply deduced what I was thinking from my expression.

'Because you are a member of the Lord High Commander's personal guard,' Drake said, 'you should not be engaged in such fights. It reflects badly on General Macharius.'

'You are correct, sir.'

'Of course I am correct. The question is, why did you get involved in this brawl at all?'

'I believe I am correct in saying we did not start it, sir.'

'The eternal excuse. Who did then?'

'A group of soldiers from General Crassus's regiment.'

‘Did they provoke you?’ Even through my hangover I was starting to wonder where this was going.

‘A little. They came over to our table. They seemed to be spoiling for a fight.’

‘I can see this is going to be a problem.’

‘Sir?’

‘Dissension in the ranks, Sergeant Lemuel. I suspect it reflects dissension in the upper echelons.’

‘You think General Crassus is at odds with the Lord High Commander, sir?’

‘I think there are people who are making it their business at least to make it look that way.’ I was starting to wonder why he was telling me this. Again he seemed able to pick the thought right out of my mind.

‘Macharius trusts you, Lemuel. And I trust you. You are reliable. It would be a loss to us if you were to be killed in some bar-room brawl.’

‘I don’t think that was very likely, sir.’

‘Men never do until it happens to them, and it happens all the time.’ My eyes widened a fraction. The secret world of stealthy killing was more his business than mine.

‘Why would anyone bother to remove me?’

‘These are strange times, Lemuel. You have spent a long time close to the centre of power in the crusade. Killing you might unsettle the Lord High Commander a fraction and this is a game where those fractions can affect the fate of billions. Also, killing you might open up a space to put someone else close to Macharius.’

I felt suddenly out of my depth. Even after all these years of following Macharius, it was odd to be talked about in this way, even though I could see the sense of some of what he was saying.

‘It might all just have been a random brawl, sir. Such things happen all the time.’

‘It might, Lemuel, but it is my job to look for unwelcome surprises concealed within the seemingly random.’

‘I don’t envy you that, sir.’

‘We all have our tasks to perform in the service of the Emperor,’ he said. ‘You have yours and I have mine. Try to keep yourself alive, Lemuel.’

I looked at him then and I wondered at the warning in his words. He

actually seemed a little concerned. I dismissed it at the time, thinking I must be imagining things, but I am not so certain now. All of us in that small charmed circle surrounding Macharius had known each other a long time. We were part of each other's lives in all the small intimate ways that long acquaintance implies. Drake was one of the higher ranked ones of the Imperium but he was used to me, as he was probably used to his favourite pieces of furniture. He might indeed be saddened for a few fractions of a second by my loss.

'Is that all, sir?' I asked.

'Yes, Lemuel. You are dismissed.' I wondered about that too. There was no punishment given. We were not restricted to the palace. We were not given any scutwork duties. Maybe in all the great events sweeping along behind us we had simply fallen through the cracks, but I doubted it. Drake was not a man to let anything do that. Neither was Macharius. I wondered if the lack of punishment was making a statement of some kind, not to us, but to General Crassus.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

‘Leo! Leo Lemuel! How are you doing?’ The words were spoken in Belial Hive dialect, a language I had not expected to hear on this street on this world. Not spoken by anyone other than Anton, Ivan or myself.

I turned and saw a familiar face, or familiar enough. It belonged to Sergei Krimov, a man I had known once a long time ago, back when I had served with the Seventh Belial. Of course, he was not the same. Ordinary soldiers in the Imperial Guard get no access to juvenat. He looked more like Sergei Krimov’s father than the Sergei I remembered. His hair was thinner and greyer. His face was leaner. His skin was more lined and tanned. He had sergeant’s stripes on his shoulder.

‘Sergei Krimov, is that you?’ I asked in the tongue of Belial.

‘None other!’ He walked up to me and slapped me on the back. ‘I haven’t seen you since Karsk and the campaign against the Angel of Fire. You haven’t aged a day. Buy you a drink?’

‘Why not?’ I said. I was genuinely pleased to catch up with an old comrade, and to hear the old tongue spoken. It was a reminder of earlier, simpler days. Sergei grasped me by the arm and led me towards a basement bar. It was a civilian place and it was not crowded at this time of day. He ordered some drinks, slammed them down on the table in front of us, and bellowed a toast before downing his glass in one.

‘You still hanging around with those other two from your old

neighbourhood?’ he asked. ‘Ivan and whatsisname, the idiot?’

‘Anton.’

‘Yeah, Anton. They still alive?’

I nodded and grinned. ‘Yes, they are.’

‘They’ve beaten the odds then. Who would have thought it thirty years ago in basic training? Who would have thought we would come this far, conquer so many worlds? Who would have thought any of us would live to see it?’

He was right. The odds against an ordinary Imperial Guardsman lasting so long in the service were great. Of course, neither of us was exactly in the position of an ordinary Guardsman. I was a bodyguard to Macharius. He was in a mechanised unit.

‘You still in Baneblades?’

‘Yes. Although I don’t know how we keep them moving. It’s getting harder and harder to get fuel and ammo and they are great hungry beasts. We seem to be short of everything these days.’

‘We’re a long way from the core and the industrial hives.’ I didn’t say anything about our failure to recapture Loki. I didn’t need to.

‘We’re certainly a long way from Belial.’ He raised his glass again, swigged it down and ordered another. I did the same. ‘Man, it’s been a long, hard road to get here.’

‘Tell me about it,’ I said.

‘You’ve done all right for yourself, bodyguard to the Lord High Commander himself. The whole regiment was pleased when you three were selected. It reflected well on all of us, we thought.’ There was something in his tone that suggested that he might have thought it at the time, but not now. I let it hang in the air. I wanted some news of the old regiment.

‘We fought against the orks on Kassari,’ he said. ‘And heretics on half a dozen words – Grommel, Mercator, Selenius, Vindicor, Mayama. Crushed them all. We brought a score of worlds into the Imperium. General Crassus led us to victory in every battle.’

‘You part of his command, Battlegroup Crassus?’

‘Have been since Kassari. He’s a great man. I know Macharius gets all the credit but Crassus leads us on the ground, and he’s never been beaten.’ He paused for a moment, looked long and hard at me. I knew he was seeing the green uniform, not a man from his old world. I took my cap and placed it on

the table, unbuttoned my jacket and put it over the back of the chair and ordered more drinks.

‘I’ve always heard he was a great general,’ I said. ‘All of the field commanders are. They wouldn’t be where they are otherwise.’

‘That may be true, but Crassus is the best, and the most generous to his troops with plunder, promotions and bonuses.’

‘You’ve done well then,’ I said. He tapped the stripes on his shoulders and said, ‘I’ve got something squirrelled away for a rainy day. How about you?’

‘I live in a palace,’ I said. ‘I never saw that coming back on Belial.’

‘And you have access to juvenat treatments, unless I am much mistaken,’ he said. ‘Either that or you are uncommonly well preserved.’

‘A little of both, I think.’ I was starting to wonder at his tone. There was a bit of an edge to it now. Maybe he was one of those men who get aggressive when they are drunk. Maybe there was some bitterness in him I had not spotted. I did not feel terribly threatened.

‘Things are going to have to change,’ he said suddenly. ‘Too much corruption at the top. Too many people doing too well out of things. Not enough supplies for the fighters at the front.’

‘A lot of people seem to think that.’

‘Don’t you?’

I shrugged. ‘Maybe.’

As quickly as it had come on his mood changed. ‘What the hell? Why talk about the politics? Let’s talk about Belial and the old neighbourhoods.’

I ordered more drinks. They kept coming. It was good to meet someone from the old hive.

I staggered back into our chambers at the palace. Anton and Ivan had returned from their stint on guard duty. I slumped in my chair, nursing a drink. ‘You’ll never guess who I ran into?’ I said.

‘A brewer’s truck,’ said Anton, ‘judging from the look of you. Otherwise, I guess you ran into the nearest bar and then ran back out again when you had spent all your money.’

‘Sergei Krimov,’ I said.

‘Slick Sergei?’ Ivan said.

‘None other.’

‘You’re telling me the Seventh are here?’ said Anton.

‘Just got in, apparently.’

Anton folded himself into an armchair and poured himself a drink. ‘That’s news,’ he said. ‘I haven’t run into anybody from the old regiment since we signed up with the Lion Guard.’

‘They are part of Battlegroup Crassus now. Were assigned to it right after Kassari.’

‘See any other faces from the old days?’ Ivan asked.

‘Just Sergei. He was out wandering on his own, checking out the sights of Acheron.’

‘Checking out the bars and looking for a criminal connection, if I know him,’ said Anton.

‘He paid his way,’ I said.

‘Did you check your wallet afterwards?’ Anton asked.

‘What have you got against the guy?’

‘He was always a fly man,’ Anton said.

‘People change,’ I said.

‘And even if they don’t, why is it our problem?’ Ivan asked. ‘Leo was drinking with him, not going into business.’

‘Suit yourself, but listen to me. The guy would sell the fillings from your teeth and then come back for your gnashers.’

‘Part of Battlegroup Crassus, eh?’ said Ivan. ‘That’s the fourth regiment that follows him arrived then. He has more regiments here now than anybody else.’

‘They should be in the field, fighting heretics,’ said Anton.

‘I’ll be sure to mention that to Crassus the next time I run into him,’ I said, but I was doing the sums in my head. Four regiments, at least one of them heavy armour, made Crassus the most powerful man on the planet now. And given the proximity of Macharius and the crusade’s other leaders, that probably made him the most powerful man in the Imperium. I wondered how he was enjoying the feeling.

‘He’s got Baneblades and Shadowswords backing him then,’ said Ivan. I could tell he was making the same sort of calculations as I was. It was sad how quickly our thoughts had degenerated into forebodings of treachery. It says something for the atmosphere of the time and place as well, I suppose. I think all of us had suspicions about the outcome of this conclave.

‘Maybe we should hold a sweepstake on it,’ Anton said.

‘On what?’ I asked.

‘On who is going to stab Macharius in the back first.’

‘It won’t come to that,’ I said.

‘Won’t it?’ Anton asked. ‘How do you know?’

I had no answer for that. There was nothing I could really say. I did not even believe in my own words myself.

‘You really think we’re going to end up fighting against the Seventh?’ Ivan said.

‘If we agree with Anton, it’s possible.’

‘It won’t come to that,’ Ivan said. His flat mechanical voice gave his words a certainty I was sure he was very far from feeling. It was hard to believe we were even talking about this, the possibility of having to defend ourselves against the men we had once fought alongside. Was this what the high ideals of the crusade had finally come to?

Maybe Macharius had made a mistake coming here with only his personal guard and the tattered remnants of the Grosslanders. Given the mauling they had taken on Loki it was possible that even they might not stand with us.

Cardinal Septimus strode into Macharius’s throne room, his servo-skulls orbiting around him. I stepped forward to bar his way. He looked at me the way a man might look down on a particularly venomous insect. His guards stared at me, but there was not a lot they could do. I had a shotgun and they did not. They had all been thoroughly scanned before entry and their weapons had been removed. I had been instructed to perform another set of checks before they got close. Just to make a point.

Once I had completed the search the cardinal was allowed to approach Macharius’s throne bearing the great sealed documents, which he presented to the Lord High Commander. The parchment looked impressive enough and Macharius gave every sign of scrutinising them closely.

‘Are you satisfied with my credentials?’ the cardinal inquired. He studied the luxurious furnishings of the chamber with a connoisseur’s eye. I felt sure he was putting a value on every mobile statue, on every dragon-fur rug.

‘It never hurts to be careful,’ Macharius said.

‘Now that we have established my *bona fides*, perhaps we could discuss the business that brought me here.’

‘By all means,’ Macharius said. The cardinal turned and looked at me and the others. It was clear he was not expecting to have to speak in front of underlings.

‘You can say what you wish in front of Sergeant Lemuel and his men,’ Macharius said. ‘I trust them with my life.’

‘You are entrusting them with more than that if you allow them to overhear the secrets of the Imperium.’

‘These men swore the same oaths of loyalty to the Emperor that I did. They can be trusted to the same extent.’

The cardinal looked as if he wanted to argue, but it was clear that Macharius was not going to be moved on this point, and perhaps that *was* the point. ‘As you wish,’ he said.

‘Speak your piece,’ Macharius said.

‘You have done extraordinary things,’ said the cardinal. His voice had changed a little. He was now an orator speaking to a crowd, even if that crowd was just the Lord High Commander and the guards present. Macharius made a small ironic gesture with his right hand. ‘You have done a greater service to the Imperium than any man in a score of generations, ten score generations. The time has come for the Imperium to show its appreciation.’

Macharius was smiling now. The smile did not reach his eyes. ‘And what form does this appreciation take?’

‘You are to be presented with honours suitable to the scale of your triumphs.’

‘You have brought these with you, I presume.’

‘How could I possibly do so? You are to be granted a triumph on Holy Terra itself. You and select regiments are to present yourself there and be acclaimed by the elite of the Imperium.’

‘I see,’ said Macharius. Of course he did. Even I could see it. He was being removed from command of the crusade. Once separated from his armies it was doubtful he would be allowed to return. ‘Of course, the commanders who are present on this world will come with me. I could hardly neglect them, or fail to share the glory with them, since they are as responsible for victory as much as I.’

Cardinal Septimus paused for a moment as if this were not quite what he expected to hear. ‘They will be honoured in their time. You are the one to

whom all the glory has accrued. You are the one whose sole triumph must be celebrated.’

Macharius tilted his head to one side. I would not have liked to have been the man he studied in such a way. It reminded me too much of a great predator studying a herbivore. ‘I understand.’

‘Good. I shall have the ship prepared for departure. We must set out immediately.’

‘Of course,’ said Macharius. Septimus looked surprised, like a warrior who had come expecting a desperate struggle and achieved an easy victory.

‘There are just a few details that must be taken care of before I depart to ensure a smooth transfer of command,’ Macharius added.

‘Naturally,’ Septimus agreed. Having won the basic point, he was not going to quibble over details, but I could see his eyes narrowing for a moment, as if he suspected Macharius of planning something devious. Pleasantries were exchanged and a few minutes later the cardinal withdrew with every appearance of civility.

‘So you have agreed to return to Terra,’ Drake said. They were in Macharius’s chambers now, surrounded by his honours, seated at his table, staring at each other across the regicide board.

‘What else was I supposed to do?’ Macharius replied. ‘I cannot turn down a direct command from the Imperium.’

‘Can’t you?’

Macharius stared at the inquisitor. ‘I trust you are not implying anything.’

It was clear that even Drake could overstep the mark. ‘It has been my life’s work to end the Great Schism,’ said Macharius. ‘I would not wish to undo it all at this late stage.’

Drake nodded. ‘I would expect no less.’

‘Of course, it is always possible that the cardinal’s ship might be delayed by some unforeseen problems.’

Drake smiled a cold smile. ‘He could always requisition others.’

‘That will take time and those too might have problems.’

‘They might.’

‘And my departure may be delayed by other unforeseen circumstances.’

‘That also is possible.’

‘Do not misunderstand me, my friend,’ said Macharius. ‘I will visit Holy

Terra. I will submit myself to the will of the Ecclesiarchy, but I will do so in my own good time, when my work here is done.'

Drake nodded. 'As you say,' he said.

'Now, I want all of the information you have gathered about Loki and Richter.'

A frown passed across the inquisitor's face. He clearly did not appreciate this development, nor Macharius's mania on the subject, but he produced a folder containing a number of documents. 'These have arrived from the agents we left in place.'

I tried to imagine what it would be like to be left behind among heretics on a world like Loki, amid the walking dead. I tried to imagine how messages could be smuggled in and out of the system. I couldn't, but clearly Drake not only could but had.

The news was not good.

It was not long before another blow to Macharius's prestige descended. I stood guard in his throne room, idly surveying the great murals of Macharius's triumph on Malachite and noting that I was shown standing guard at his shoulder, when the doors were suddenly thrown open and a giant strode in, a barbaric figure encased in ceramite armour.

'Greetings, General Macharius,' he said, in a great booming voice. Macharius rose and bowed in the most formal manner then strode across the chequered mosaic of the floor to slap the giant on the back. The sound echoed across the chamber like a gunshot.

'Greetings, Logan Grimnar. It has been too long.' It had been a number of years since we had fought alongside the Space Wolf on Demetrius. I frowned at the memories that the sight of him brought back. I had unpleasant recollections of that particular world and the things we had found there.

'Indeed,' said Grimnar. 'But it does my heart good to see you.'

'You did not come here just to exchange pleasantries, though,' said Macharius.

'No. The Great Wolf would have words with you.' There was something about the way Grimnar spoke, an odd undertone, that made me look at him twice. If I had not known better I would have said it was resentment. Of course, the Emperor's Chosen are above such things.

Macharius heard it too. Just for a moment a frown passed across his face. ‘And he sent you as his personal messenger.’

‘He does us both honour,’ said Grimnar.

‘A feast will be prepared,’ said Macharius. He clearly remembered his last such encounter with the Wolves of Space. ‘We shall meet as soon as he wishes.’

‘This evening then,’ said Grimnar. ‘I will bear your words to him.’

And with that he turned on his heel and left. In anyone else it would have been a sign of profound disrespect, but Grimnar and his ilk were above the petty protocols of politeness that bound the rest of us. They were laws unto themselves and had been since before the foundation of the Imperium.

Macharius’s gaze followed him gloomily. Clearly he suspected that whatever had caused the Great Wolf to demand an audience could not be good.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It takes a lot of work to prepare a feast for a company of Space Wolves. The tables groaned under the weight of sides of beef, of whole sheep roasted on spits, of Lacedomean calix basted in their own blood and stuffed with steaks. Whole chickens sat on plates. Broached barrels of ale and tankards full of strong, fiery spirits sat beside every plate.

I looked out at the crowd of awed humans and mortal gods and I pledged I would not make the same mistake as last time. At the high table Ulrik Grimfang and his retinue sat with Macharius and all his generals. Cardinal Septimus was present too, smiling his too-satisfied smile, the servo-skulls still orbiting and seeming to take in everything with their dead, empty eyes. Across the chamber I saw Grimfang looking at me. His nostrils flared and he smiled, revealing massive fangs. He beckoned to me with one gauntleted hand and I could do little else but approach.

‘You do not seem to be drinking so fiercely this time as you once did,’ he said. It could have been taken as an insult by a man more suicidal than myself, but he was smiling in a way that was clearly meant to be friendly. It was hard to take the words in the spirit they were intended. Being smiled at by a Space Wolf is like being smiled at by a sabre-tooth.

‘I am older now and perhaps wiser,’ I said. He laughed. There was wild mirth in the sound that echoed through the room. It was a contagious sound, although from anyone else it would have sounded crazed. ‘I find my stomach cannot take strong drink as well as it once did.’

‘You did not dishonour yourself the last time,’ he said.

‘I thank you,’ I said. There seemed little else to say.

‘Logan Grimnar speaks well of you,’ the Great Wolf said. ‘You would do me honour by serving as my cupbearer.’

I looked over at Macharius. Much as I disliked the idea of refusing the Great Wolf anything, Macharius was my commander and it was him that I obeyed. He nodded almost imperceptibly.

I stood beside the Great Wolf and poured his drinks. It was a sign of favour, not a form of being demeaned, and I recognised it for what it was. Thus I came to be standing by the high table during the last exchange between Macharius and the Great Wolf.

‘We have come to bid you farewell, General Macharius,’ said Grimfang.

‘Farewell?’ Macharius frowned slightly. He was clearly calculating all the possible consequences of this declaration.

‘We depart for the Gothic Sector. There is an orkish invasion there and we must fight.’

‘There is fighting to be done here yet and glory to be gained,’ said Macharius. He raised a glass and toasted the Great Wolf. Grimfang responded in kind, then said, ‘It is as you say, but we have a duty to the Imperium and its defenceless people. Succour has been requested and we must grant it.’

I tried to imagine all that must be going through Macharius’s mind at that point. He had just been told that his crusade was of less importance than this new invasion. The fact that this might well have been the truth in no way diminished the scale of the blow. The support of many Chapters of Space Marines, most importantly the personal support of the Space Wolves, had lent him great prestige, had made it seem to many that his campaign had enjoyed support at the highest spiritual and martial level. Its abandonment could not help but undermine that impression. It made a statement that more important things were happening elsewhere, that the crusade was not the focal event in the galaxy.

If these thoughts ran through Macharius’s mind, and I am sure that they must have, he gave no sign of it and he knew better than to protest to Grimfang or attempt to change his mind. Not even Macharius’s powers of persuasion or his great charisma were up to that.

The drinking continued, songs were sung, tales of the great battles were

retold, but a cloud had descended on the feast and did not lift for the entire evening.

The last song was sung, the last ale was drunk. With many protestations of friendship the Great Wolf and his retinue rose to make their departure, seemingly none the worse for wear from the vast amounts of ale and beef they had consumed.

The same could not be said for the mere mortals present. All of them, even Macharius, were showing signs of having consumed too much, to the extent that many of them seemed to have their thoughts written on their faces. Sober as I was, I took the opportunity to study them, knowing it would be a rare occasion indeed.

Macharius was all controlled charm. His words were not even slightly slurred and his movements had all their usual grace, but there was a narrowness around his eyes, and a grim twist at the corners of his lips that spoke of his anger to those who knew him well.

Drake's face was a mask. His eyes were pits into which you could stare and lose yourself. He seemed unusually thoughtful, as if he were measuring and weighing the events of the evening in his mind, turning things over from every angle, looking for some fault or advantage.

Cardinal Septimus's face was masked by a bland smile. Since his conversation with Macharius, he had been amiability itself, and he was quite as capable of interpreting the Space Wolves withdrawal of support as I was – more so. It all played towards his purposes. Indeed, at that moment, I asked myself whether the departure of the Space Wolves, the request for their aid, might not have had something to do with him. It certainly removed one of the great props of Macharius's power and prestige. Who would have dared oppose him openly when it was quite clear he enjoyed the support of the Emperor's Angels?

Things had just become a lot murkier.

I thought I detected a look of satisfaction on General Crassus's toad face. Anything that weakened Macharius's position must strengthen his. Just at that moment his mask slipped a little and I knew who the chief conspirator against Macharius must be. As luck would have it, he glanced around and caught me looking at him. Our eyes met for a moment and he seemed to be weighing me up, considering me, then he let his glance slide away. I was

not fooled – he knew who I was and he would remember me.

Logan Grimnar rose from where he had been sitting, the last of the Space Wolves to depart. His small retinue remained watching him as he loped over to Macharius and extended his hand.

'We have shed blood together, and fought beside each other. I owe you a debt of honour and it will be repaid.' I thought then that he was merely being diplomatic, throwing a sop to the Lord High Commander to soften the departure of his Chapter, but events were to prove differently.

Suddenly Cardinal Septimus looked a little less smug and General Crassus considerably more wary. Macharius smiled and said, 'I thank you, my friend. I will not forget this.'

He looked directly at Crassus and at the cardinal and said, 'I will not forget any of this.'

After the feast we escorted Macharius to his chambers. Once he was through the doors he seemed to shrink in on himself, to become a smaller man. He looked tired and angry and somehow diminished. I could see how much of a strain the banquet had been on him. He walked over to a cabinet, opened it and poured himself a drink, then slumped down in his chair.

He looked up at me and said, 'The Great Wolf did you more honour than he did me, Lemuel.'

I met his gaze and wondered how angry he was. There was a skull-like quality to his appearance, a gauntness I had not really noticed before, a tightness to the skin of his face. It came to me then that Macharius was very old, and he was finally showing his age, perhaps even dying. Even juvenat has its limits, after all.

'I am sorry about that, sir,' I said eventually. There did not seem to be much else that I could say. Macharius looked down at his regicide board, lifted a piece and toyed with it. 'They think it's over,' he said, so softly that no one but me could have heard it.

'Sir?' I was not sure whether he wanted to be overheard, whether he was even talking to me.

'I said they think it's over, that I am finished, that they can simply replace me and that things will go on.'

'I don't think they can, sir,' I said. They could, but it did not seem my place to say it.

‘The Space Marines are going because they think there is no longer glory to be won here. The vultures will see this as a sign to attack.’

I kept quiet. He was speaking to himself, as old people sometimes do, as I could recall them doing back in the hive cities of Belial in my youth. More than ever I found myself wondering about Macharius’s health, mental and otherwise.

‘I will not be replaced until I am ready,’ said Macharius. ‘My work is not yet done.’

Looking at him then I wondered if he would think his work was ever done. He had lived on the absolute peak of power for so long I do not think he could imagine living anywhere else. And yet perhaps he was close to realising that in the whole Imperium there was only one man who was irreplaceable and he was encased in the Golden Throne. He rose from the chair, prowled over to a cabinet, produced a map and smoothed it out on the surface of a table. I recognised it at once. It was a map of Loki. He studied it with the intensity of a man contemplating his soul’s salvation. I noticed that parts of it had been marked in blood-red ink. I suspected the map was part of the parcel of documents Drake had brought earlier.

After a moment, he seemed to realise that I was still there. ‘That will be all, Lemuel,’ he said.

I saluted and left him to himself.

Inquisitor Drake awaited me in my rooms. There was no need to ask how he had got there. There were no security systems he could not bypass and he was capable of ensuring that Ivan and Anton would not notice him. I was sure the pair were snoring away in their own chambers.

‘You have come from the Lord High Commander’s chamber,’ Drake said. It was not a question. He knew everything that went on within the palace.

‘Yes,’ I said. I stared at him, and considered demanding that either he told me what he wanted or he got out. The feast, the departure of the Space Wolves and my last glimpse of Macharius had left me depressed. In the end, though, it turned out I was not quite so depressed as to be tired of living, so I remained silent.

‘What did you think?’

‘He is not best pleased by the Space Wolves departure,’ I said. ‘He sees it as a blow to his prestige.’

‘Obviously, Lemuel. Obviously. I meant what did you think of him. How did he seem to you?’

‘Tired.’

‘Tired? Is that all?’

‘Is that not enough? For a man like Macharius to be tired is unthinkable. I have never seen him like this before. It’s…’

The word had left my mouth before I could recall it. Drake stood taller and more attentively. It was too much to hope that he had not noticed.

‘It’s what?’ he said. ‘You were going to say something.’

‘Nothing,’ I said.

‘Do not lie to me, Sergeant Lemuel. We have known each other too long for that to work.’

I supposed it was true, but I found myself resenting this calm, authoritative man with his aura of absolute certainty, of knowing me better than I knew myself.

‘Speak!’ he said and I am sure there was some powerful compulsion laced into his words, backed by his strange psyker powers.

‘He seems old, as if the juvenat has ceased to work, as if he is wearing out.’

The words hung in the air for a long time. Neither of us said anything. Drake took a seat in one of the chairs. He poured himself a drink from a hip flask and then much to my astonishment, he offered me one. I took it, wondering if perhaps it was poisoned. I dismissed the idea. If Drake wanted me dead, I would be dead.

‘The juvenat *has* ceased working,’ he said, at last.

‘No,’ I said. I simply did not want to believe it.

‘It stops working for everybody, eventually,’ Drake said. ‘Otherwise we would all live to be as old as the Emperor.’

He took a sip of his drink then raised it to the light and turned it with his long slender fingers. He looked at it from all angles and I began to wonder whether despite appearances the inquisitor might not be somewhat drunk. His powers enabled him to process as much alcohol as a Space Marine with as little effect if he wished it, but perhaps he did not wish it, this night of all nights.

‘I have seen the medical reports,’ Drake said. ‘His body is suffering from advanced metabolic deterioration. It does not really show yet, but the

process is accelerating. It will affect him mentally eventually, if it has not already.' There was a certainty in his manner that made it impossible to doubt him.

'You are saying that he is dying, that all those halted years are going to catch up with him?'

Drake nodded. 'In a way that will likely be most unpleasant.'

'Why are you telling me?'

'Because you are as close to him as anyone. You will notice it sooner or later, if you have not already.'

Once it had been pointed out, it was impossible not to remember the tiny slips, the small failures.

'Do you really think he would have lost on Loki if he had been the same man as he was on Karsk?' Drake asked.

'Is this why the Imperium wants him replaced?'

Drake shook his head. 'The Imperium does not want him replaced. People want him replaced, people with a great deal of power within the Imperium. And the people who want him replaced want him replaced so that they can have his power, prestige and position. Some of them want to be the next Macharius. Most of them simply want power. Macharius is just an obstacle in the way of their ambitions.'

'He cannot be replaced,' I said. 'He is a great man. None greater.'

'You know that. I know that. There are people who choose to believe otherwise. Worse, there are people who would disgrace him if they could, for they do not like to live in a world containing those greater than themselves. They would pull him down to their level if they could. He has outwitted them for a long time but he is slipping. Everyone does eventually.'

'Even you, inquisitor?'

'That remains to be seen,' he said, 'but yes, one day perhaps, even me.'

'Once again I ask you why you are telling me this.'

'Perhaps because I have to tell somebody, and you at least are trustworthy. Also, you are close to Macharius. If you notice anything, you will tell me.'

'You are very certain of that.'

'It is in Macharius's best interests and it is in your best interests. These are dangerous times, for all of us.'

I wondered then at the pressure Drake must have felt himself to be under.

He was a friend and long-time comrade of Macharius, one of the architects of the crusade, and yet he too was a servant of the Imperium and somewhere he too must have hidden masters with their own agenda.

‘You won’t let them replace him, will you?’ I don’t know to this day why I asked. Perhaps I simply sought reassurance.

‘Replace him, no. You were correct earlier. He is irreplaceable.’

He departed, leaving me with much to think about.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The next morning, Macharius looked like his old self. It was as if the previous evening had been a bad dream and I had imagined what I had seen and my conversation with Drake. I would have been a lot happier if that had been the case.

Drake was in Macharius's council chamber. He gave no sign that we had talked the night before. Tarka was there and Crassus and the other generals. Macharius greeted them all affably, and it was obvious, looking at them, that they were surprised by how good his mood was. I wondered if this was just his way of keeping his rivals off-balance. It was always something Macharius had excelled at.

'Good morning, gentlemen,' Macharius said. 'I have good news for you. Before I depart for Holy Terra, I intend to settle matters once and for all with Richter and his heretics, and leave the crusade in a much stronger position.'

Cardinal Septimus shot Macharius a surprised look. Clearly he had not been expecting anything like this. 'How do you propose to do that, Lord High Commander?' he asked.

Macharius tapped the side of his nose. 'At the moment that must remain a secret, but I have discovered a huge flaw in the enemy's defences.'

'It is a pity that you could not have discovered it earlier,' said General Crassus. All eyes swivelled to look at him. It was a direct criticism of the supreme commander and not one anybody would have dared voice in the

past. It was a measure of how much respect for Macharius had slipped, and yet there was something about the Lord High Commander's manner that had indeed unsettled his potential successors. No one rushed to support Crassus. Everyone waited to hear what Macharius had to say.

He smiled with all his old charm. 'All of us make mistakes, old comrade,' he said. 'Even you have.'

The words hung in the air, leaving everyone to wonder whether Macharius meant during some past campaign or whether he was referring to the current campaign to have him replaced. It was an ambiguity no one, least of all General Crassus, seemed to want to have cleared up.

'How long will this take?' Cardinal Septimus asked.

'No more than a month,' said Macharius. 'Certainly no longer than it will take for your ship to be prepared for the long voyage to Terra.'

'It would perhaps be as well for you to inform us of the weaknesses you have discovered in the defences of Loki,' said General Tarka. 'In case anything should happen to you.'

He sounded serious – he clearly hadn't lost all of his respect for Macharius's military prowess. He believed that if Macharius said he had found a flaw then a flaw there must be. It was only natural. With a record like Macharius's, most people would have believed that.

'What could possibly happen to me here on Acheron?' said Macharius. 'I am surrounded by the finest troops of the Imperium. No enemy threatens. I am in perfect health.'

Tarka opened his mouth as if he were about to say something, but then snapped it closed again. I wondered if Drake was the only one who had access to the Lord High Commander's medical records. Such a thing was supposed to be a very closely guarded secret, but bribes could buy almost anything provided they were big enough.

Cardinal Septimus glanced at Tarka and something wordless seemed to pass between them. The general said nothing more. I wondered if Macharius really had found a chink in the heretics' defences and part of me agreed with what Crassus had said. It was indeed a pity that Macharius had not spotted it before all the slaughter we had endured there. I kept my face expressionless. The important thing was that Macharius had found us a route to victory.

I could not let myself doubt that.

The Drunken Ratling was crowded. Sergei Krimov made space for me in the corner booth. He ordered drinks and introduced me to a couple of friends. They were not from his regiment, though they wore the uniform. They did not sound like Belial Hivers. They did not sound like anybody from Belial at all.

They did not look at all daunted by the suspicious looks I shot at them. ‘These are friends of mine,’ Sergei said. ‘They wanted to meet you and I could not see the harm.’

His face was carefully bland but I guessed that this was anything but a chance meeting. Perhaps the whole thing was a setup from our very first encounter. I took a drink and tried not to let the thoughts show on my face.

‘This is Konstantin and this is Mikhail,’ said Sergei. If those were their real names, I was a Space Wolf. I toyed with saying so, but it hardly seemed diplomatic. Konstantin was a big man with cropped hair and a nose that had been flattened by a blow of great force. Mikhail was smaller and lighter. He had a writhing way of turning that made me think of a weasel.

‘Pleased to make your acquaintance,’ said Konstantin. Mikhail said nothing.

‘Likewise,’ I said. ‘Which part of the Masterforge do you hail from?’

Konstantin ignored my question, probably because he did not have an answer for it. Instead, he said, ‘You are one of the heroes who guard the Lord High Commander.’

‘I am part of the Lion Guard,’ I said. ‘The uniform gives it away, I suppose.’

‘It is a post of quite awesome responsibility,’ Konstantin said, ‘and no few risks.’

‘The life of a Guardsman is full of those,’ I said, ‘as you must know yourself.’

The more I talked with Konstantin and looked at Mikhail, the less I was sure this was true. There was something about their manner that suggested they had never been common soldiers, had perhaps never been soldiers at all.

‘True, true,’ he said, ‘but defending Macharius must be especially dangerous. There are assassins everywhere…’

‘Surely not here on Acheron,’ I said. ‘No one could be so disloyal.’

‘Alas, perhaps even here,’ said Konstantin. He had quite a light voice for

so large a man, and a confiding tone of voice.

‘If you know of any conspiracy against the Lord High Commander you should inform the proper authorities,’ I said.

‘Perhaps that is what I am doing,’ he said. Mikhail studied his drink, studied his fingernails, glanced at me and returned to studying his drink. I wondered exactly who he was and what he was doing here.

‘Perhaps?’ Sergei rose from the table and said, ‘I shall get some more drinks.’ It seemed he did not want to be present for this part of the conversation.

‘You do not seem so surprised about talk of a conspiracy,’ said Konstantin. ‘Perhaps you have heard talk of such things, of such disloyalty.’

‘I have heard that there are those who are not happy with the Lord High Commander’s recent generalship.’

‘There are always disaffected souls,’ said Konstantin. I was starting to wonder who he really was. Could he perhaps be one of Drake’s agents testing my loyalty? Or was he something else? ‘There are those who plot a change in the leadership of the crusade.’

I said nothing. There are times when it is best simply to keep your mouth shut. Konstantin looked at Mikhail, as if seeking support, but the smaller one seemed too wrapped up in the contemplation of his glass, so Konstantin went on speaking.

‘A man who uncovered such a conspiracy could become wealthy,’ he said.

I wondered if he was seeking a reward for information. It seemed unlikely. There were far better people to approach if such were the case. Of course, it was possible that I was the only potential contact he had.

‘Perhaps,’ I said.

‘You could become a wealthy man if you uncovered such a conspiracy.’ There was a strange emphasis on the way he said the words, and I suddenly became aware that Mikhail, despite all appearances to the contrary, was paying close attention to what was being said. He seemed in some subtle way to be straining at an invisible leash.

‘Perhaps,’ I said.

‘You would like to become a wealthy man,’ Mikhail said. He was making a statement, passing a considered judgement.

‘Who would not?’

‘As one of Macharius’s Guards you must be rich already.’

‘You are sadly misinformed if you think that.’

‘The Lord High Commander is not generous?’

‘The Lord High Commander expects his soldiers to perform the duties they swore to. Service to the Emperor is reward enough.’

‘And you believe in doing your duty?’

‘I believe in serving the Emperor.’

‘Serving Macharius is not the same as serving the Emperor.’

‘At the moment it is,’ I said.

‘Ah, at the moment,’ said Mikhail. ‘That is an important qualification.’

‘And if Macharius were to be replaced, as it seems he is, you would serve his successor just as loyally.’

‘Of course,’ I said.

‘Tell me, what do you think will become of you when Macharius departs?’ he asked. ‘He will have no more need of a personal guard.’

‘I will serve as I am told.’

‘You will be returned to your original regiment,’ said Mikhail.

‘I can think of worse things,’ I said.

‘I can think of better.’

‘Why don’t you tell me of them,’ I said.

‘You could be kept on as part of the retinue of the new commander, promoted, given special assignments, even retire with honour and great wealth.’

‘That would be pleasant,’ I said. ‘But we were talking about conspiracies against Macharius. We seem to have come a long way from there.’

‘There is evidence to be gathered, reports to be made,’ said Konstantin. ‘We will let you know when things are finalised. For now we must depart. It has been pleasant meeting you. I believe we shall meet again.’

‘I look forward to it,’ I said. They rose and bowed and departed. Sergei returned from the bar. I could not help but notice he had only brought two drinks.

‘Interesting conversation?’ he asked.

‘Very,’ I said.

He smiled. ‘I thought it might be.’

I was summoned to see the inquisitor as soon as I returned to the palace. It was becoming quite a habit of his. His bodyguard escorted me to his door

and checked me for weapons before allowing me to pass inside. That had not happened in a long time.

‘Good evening, Lemuel,’ he said. He was standing with his back to me, looking out the window. Across from us the coffin-black starscrapers limned the night, black flames dancing over them. I did not doubt he was aware of me. If he could not follow my reflection in the window, his strange psyker powers gave him other senses than those we mortals are stuck with.

‘You wished to see me, inquisitor,’ I said. He turned to face me. His cowl was down and his lean, pale face was underlit by the glow-globe on his desk. His features gave me no hint of what he was thinking. He moved to the desk, sat down in the floating chair, leaned forward and steepled his fingers. He looked at me over them as if sighting a gun. I could not help but notice that a bolt pistol sat on his desk, unholstered. It was a not very subtle message.

‘I understand you were out drinking again this evening,’ he said.

‘I was.’ I considered telling him that I failed to see what concern that was of his, but I already had some idea of where this was going.

‘You met some old friends of yours.’

‘One old friend,’ I said. ‘Or rather one former comrade from the Seventh Belial and two of his friends.’

‘Who were they?’

I gave the names of Konstantin and Mikhail and their descriptions.

‘And what did you think of them?’

‘Their conversation was elliptical.’

‘How so?’

‘They hinted at conspiracies against Macharius. They hinted that they might be seeking rewards. They hinted at a lot of things and in the end said nothing.’

‘Why do you think they did that?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You don’t know, Lemuel, but you can guess. You are a clever man.’

‘I think they were feeling me out, to see how I would react to such talk. I get the impression they are hoping that I will become their agent.’

‘Why would they think that is possible?’

‘I don’t know, inquisitor. Perhaps you can tell me.’ He looked at me for a long time. I felt cold sweat appear on my brow, but I was damned if I was

going to say anything more. Eventually he smiled, showing his small white teeth. It was not a pleasant expression. There was no humour in it.

‘Your friends, Konstantin and Mikhail…’

‘They are not my friends.’

‘I would be obliged if you did not interrupt me again, Sergeant Lemuel.’ The words were quietly spoken but there was a world of menace behind them. ‘Your friends, or perhaps I should say, your soon-to-be friends, Konstantin and Mikhail, work for Major Kelly, who is chief of staff, chief intelligence gatherer and some would say master of assassins for General Crassus.’

He paused, glanced at his data-slate, then looked at me directly. ‘You don’t seem entirely surprised.’

‘General Crassus seems a most ambitious man,’ I said.

‘He is. He sees himself as the chief candidate to replace the Lord High Commander when he departs for Terra.’

‘Is he?’

‘That would be Cardinal Septimus’s decision, but my guess is that he is. Or at least he would be, if Macharius actually departed.’

‘The Lord High Commander has already said he will.’

‘What the Lord High Commander says he will do and what he actually does may prove to be two different things, Lemuel. It seems that General Crassus has already begun to think so. He is not alone in this. All of Macharius’s commanders know about his talent for feint and deception.’

‘As you say, inquisitor.’

‘And you are wondering why I am telling you this.’

‘I am sure you have your reasons, sir.’

‘And I am sure you can guess them.’

‘I am a simple man, sir. I like to have my duties and responsibilities spelled out for me.’

He shrugged. ‘If either of these two men approach you again, or anyone else does in a similar capacity, you will agree to whatever they ask, and then report the matter to me.’

‘Even if they suggest disloyalty to Lord High Commander Macharius, sir?’

‘Particularly if they do that.’

‘That would be treason, sir.’

‘You are worried that you might be branded a traitor if you do this.’

I nodded.

‘You will be branded a traitor if you do not.’

I stared at him. ‘What do you mean?’

‘There is already enough evidence to suggest you are part of a conspiracy, Lemuel.’

‘I can assure you I am not.’

‘And I believe you, and I trust you, which is why I am asking you to do this. These are interesting times, and many things hang in the balance. Your duty is to see to Macharius’s safety and I am asking you to do your duty.’

‘You wish me to help smoke out potential traitors, sir.’

‘Precisely so.’ He paused for a minute. I looked over his shoulder at the black flames dancing over the black starscrapers and considered his words. Drake did not really need any evidence against me. He had the power to make me disappear at his whim. I was not sure whether he really believed in my innocence, but I could see that did not matter to him. I was simply a tool he was going to use in his hunt for traitors against Macharius. I was a pawn in his great game.

‘I will do it,’ I said, as smartly as I could, as if I were volunteering for dangerous duty, as if I had any real choice in the matter.

‘I am glad to hear that,’ Drake said, and sounded as if he really meant it. He stood up and I noticed that there was a hypodermic in his hand. He indicated that I should come closer. I wondered what he was going to do.

‘There’s no need to be so skittish,’ Drake said. ‘If I wanted to kill you, I would not need to do it this way.’

‘What is in that?’ I said. The needle was very long and sharp and I did not like the way its point glittered in the glow-globe’s light.

‘It contains a very powerful anti-venom,’ he said. ‘It should increase your resistance to all drugs and poisons for the period of about one moon.’

‘You think someone is going to try to poison me?’

‘I think someone may try to use certain serums on you.’ As he spoke, he slid the needle into my arm. It stung and then an odd coolness spread from it. He reached out and touched my forehead with his fingers. I suddenly felt dizzy. Strange images flickered through my head. He spoke words and I knew I would remember them some day but I could not remember them now. They vanished from my consciousness like mist before a strong wind, leaving only the awareness that I had once possessed the knowledge of

them.

I tried to move and found that I could not. My muscles seemed paralysed and I felt a completely stark and utter terror the like I had not felt before. This was what it was like to be totally helpless when danger threatened. My head reeled with the knowledge that something had been done to my thoughts. I glared at Drake, in that moment hating and fearing him in equal measure.

‘Tell no one about this little chat.’

I nodded even as I wondered whether Drake had his own agenda in this. I was beginning to get the sense that my life might be in real peril here.

‘You are dismissed, Lemuel.’

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I met Sergei in the tavern. Konstantin and Mikhail were with him. They were dressed as they had been previously. They greeted me warmly as I sat down in their private booth, which I could not help but notice was in a corner, and commanded clear lines of sight to the exits. Drinks were placed on the table by Sergei and nothing was said except toasts until we had downed a few. All three of them looked at me with slightly glazed eyes that were supposed to hint at drunkenness. I suspected they were less so than I.

'Things go well in the palace?' Konstantin asked. He was taking the lead again, but as before I suspected that Mikhail was his superior.

I nodded. 'Things go as well as can be expected.'

'The Lord High Commander makes ready to depart?'

'That is not my place to say,' I said.

'Your discretion is to be admired,' said Mikhail. 'But everyone knows he has agreed to go to Terra with Cardinal Septimus. Or has he not?'

'Macharius does not confide his plans in me.'

'But you are his trusted bodyguard.'

'And I will remain so as long as I keep his secrets,' I said. If these men were really trying to recruit me into some conspiracy I was not going to make it easy for them. Sergei smiled and nodded as if I were being very wise.

'You are also on good terms with Inquisitor Drake,' said Mikhail suddenly.

'I would not go that far.'

‘You talked to him after the last time you saw us,’ he said. He was smiling unpleasantly and I felt the urge to punch him in his smirking face.

‘I was summoned to his presence,’ I said.

‘What did he want?’

‘He wanted to know who I had been seeing.’

‘You told him, of course.’

‘I told him I had been drinking with Sergei here and he had introduced me to you two, and that you claimed to have information concerning a conspiracy against Macharius.’

‘What did he say to that?’

‘He told me to keep in touch with you and report to him any conversations we might have.’

I saw Sergei and Konstantin exchange glances. ‘Is that all?’

‘Drake is a busy man,’ I said. ‘I am sorry to have to tell you this but I doubt you are all that important to him. I doubt I am either.’

‘Yet he takes enough interest to ask about us.’

‘These are troubled times. Like I said, I don’t think you are that important to him, but if you insist I can bring your names up again.’ I let a little malice show in my voice.

‘That won’t be necessary,’ said Mikhail.

‘So do you have any more information about this supposed conspiracy?’

‘We do, but first we have some questions to put to you.’

‘And what would those be?’

My skin felt tingly now, and his outline swayed a little in my field of vision. ‘This is strong booze,’ I said. Mikhail’s smile became ever more mocking. ‘I can’t say I’ve noticed,’ he said.

‘What questions did you have?’ His face seemed to be growing larger. It became just about the only thing in the room I could focus on.

‘Do you think Macharius really intends to go to Terra?’

‘Not if he can help it,’ I said. The words just seemed to slip out. Mikhail looked very friendly and very trustworthy. Surely it was safe to tell him.

‘And do you think this is wise?’

‘I don’t think it’s wise for anyone to disobey a direct order from the Imperium.’

‘You think Macharius can get away with it.’

‘If anyone can, he can.’

‘And you, a sworn soldier of the Emperor, don’t see anything wrong with that.’

‘It is wrong to disobey the Emperor’s commands,’ I said.

‘And yet you have just said Macharius might.’

‘I did, didn’t I?’

‘Do you think Macharius is right to do so?’

‘No.’

‘What do you think of Macharius?’

‘He is the greatest general alive, a hero of the Imperium, a legend…’

‘But?’

‘But he has made mistakes. He is not the man he once was, not the man I once served.’

I was surprised to hear myself saying the words, even more surprised by the fact that I believed them to be the truth.

‘He has made mistakes, you say?’ Mikhail’s voice was friendly but disbelieving. ‘Where?’

‘On Loki. We died in the hundreds of thousands there and only afterwards did he reveal he has discovered the weaknesses of Richter’s position.’

‘You resent that.’

‘Yes. I saw thousands of good men die. I saw friends of mine die.’ Again I was surprised to find the depths of anger in me.

‘Some would say that what you are saying is traitorous,’ said Mikhail. I stared at them. There was no denying it. My head was swirling. I realised that I was more than drunk – I had been drugged. It seemed that Drake had lied to me about the anti-toxin.

‘You drugged me…’ I said. They looked at me and laughed as I fell face forward onto the table.

They lifted me to my feet. I tried to call for help but the words just came out as drunken, slurred babbling. I saw heads turn to watch me go, but all they saw was a drunk soldier being carried out by his not-quite-so-drunk comrades. There was nothing unusual about it.

I was bundled into the back of a groundcar, large and luxurious, and driven off into the darkness. I was aware of the heavy door thunking shut behind me and large men getting in.

The car drove off into the night, moving through the corpse-black, mirrored

starscrapers. I was only partially aware of my surroundings. I could hear voices as if from a great way off. They seemed to be discussing something of no great importance, so I lay there, trying to avoid being sick. It suddenly seemed of great importance that I avoid vomiting over the clean, luxurious interior of this great vehicle.

The car drew up at a run-down building on the edge of the city and slipped through a raised door which slid down behind it. I knew that I had vanished off the face of the planet as far as anyone looking for me was concerned.

I was taken into a huge room, lit by dimly glowing globes that just seemed to hover in the air. A man in white robes stood there. He indicated a surgical table with one long lean hand. The men carrying me put me down on it. I tried to struggle, but my hands just flailed the air uselessly as I was strapped down. The man in white robes produced a long hypodermic. If he started making promises about anti-toxins I was going to hit him, I thought, if I was capable of it. I noticed that he was wearing small pebble glasses that caught the light. At times they were like mirrors full of flame. At times I could see cold grey eyes studying me.

My sleeve was pulled up. The needle went in. This time it burned like fire. My muscles suddenly felt under control again. My mind felt lucid. I tried to rise but I was strapped down.

The medic studied me the way a man might study a new and particularly interesting form of insect. He said, ‘I am going to give you another injection. It will not hurt you as long as you answer me truthfully. If you answer all the questions with the truth no harm will come to you.’

‘For some strange reason, I don’t believe you,’ I said.

‘It matters little whether you believe me or not. You will answer, and you will answer truthfully – your life depends on it.’

I did believe that, so I remained silent. Another injection was given and suddenly things did not seem so bad. I felt relaxed and amiable and I wondered why I had been so bothered just a few minutes ago; after all, these people were friendly.

The questions began, about Macharius, about how I felt about him, about my loyalty. I answered honestly. I spoke of my doubts and resentments and as I did so the questions took on a different tone. I was asked whether I really was prepared to oppose Macharius and what reward I would do it for. I spoke openly and honestly and was surprised to find I had a price, a high

one, but it was there. The medic nodded as I talked and I realised what seemed like a high price to me seemed like a small price to him and I told him so. The price went up. He smiled and I could see that he was pleased. He wanted to help me. He wanted me to be happy. He wanted me to have a price and I knew that no matter how high it was he would meet it.

In the end, the questioning stopped and my white-robed interrogator looked over at Konstantin and Mikhail. ‘He is telling the truth,’ he said. ‘He will betray Macharius if his price is met.’

The two men looked at each other and then at me. They were measuring me now, testing me, weighing what I had said against other things that they knew, and I could see that my life hung on their decision. If they decided they did not believe their medic friend they had no reason for letting me live. I looked back at them, numb and a little afraid. I could just move my head. There was no chance of me breaking free from the table. Even if I did I was surrounded by enemies.

Konstantin looked at the medic. ‘You are sure?’

‘Certain. At this dosage, there is no chance he could lie to us. This man is, for our purposes at least, trustworthy.’

Mikhail still looked dubious. I could tell he did not like me, but then again, it looked like I was the sort of man he had been sent to find. He knelt down beside me and spoke very slowly and very carefully. ‘I am going to let you up now. Do nothing sudden and nothing stupid and you will become a very wealthy and powerful man. Do you understand me?’

I nodded. He undid the straps. I noticed a small but powerful-looking pistol was pointing right at me. Konstantin held something similar.

I was led out into another room.

This room was better furnished. A bottle of Belial whisky sat on the table along with a few glasses. Konstantin poured some and offered it to me. I shook my head.

‘You’ll forgive my reluctance,’ I said, ‘but after my last drink with you I am not inclined to take another.’

Konstantin smiled at that, no hard feelings. ‘I am sorry, but we had to do this. We needed to know that you are the sort of man to do what is needed and not betray us.’

‘A traitor, you mean.’ I could not keep the bitterness out of my voice. No

one likes to discover they have a price.

‘You are not a traitor to the Imperium, Macharius is. He refuses to obey orders from his superiors. He refuses to make way for his successors. You said yourself he is slipping. It is time he stood aside and let those who are still capable get on with the job.’

I thought about him and I thought of the vast whirlpool of intrigue that swirled over this planet. I tried to tell myself that this was only to be expected, that the great generals were all products of the Schism, that they were used to thinking in terms of personal ambition and personal glory. Macharius had once overcome them on the field and bound them to his service; now they saw the chance to break away and follow their own personal interests again. All of them looked at what Richter had done and thought *I could do that*, and Septimus had offered them a way to do it and still remain loyal to the Imperium.

Mikhail said, ‘We must apologise for what we did. We are playing for high stakes and we needed to know whether you were trustworthy.’

‘I think the question is not whether I am trustworthy but whether you are,’ I said.

‘We have no reason to betray you. We must trust each other.’

‘Really,’ I said.

‘Yes. If you betray us then you fall with us. We have a record of all you have said.’

‘I was drugged,’ I said.

‘So you will claim. But your words were true, were they not?’

‘Yes,’ I conceded.

‘And it does no one any good for word of any of this to become public. The crusade must present a united front even after Macharius is gone,’ Mikhail said.

‘Especially after Macharius is gone,’ said Konstantin.

‘He is not gone yet,’ I said.

‘But he will be soon,’ said Konstantin. ‘One way or another.’

‘We will return to the tavern now,’ said Mikhail, ‘and we will drink.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘That seems like the best thing to do.’

‘You did something to my mind,’ I said to Drake. He sat behind his desk and studied the gargoyle lantern. His face was shadowy in its under light.

‘If I had not you would now be dead,’ he said. ‘Those men treated you with powerful truth drugs in dosages that were very close to fatal.’

‘I said things,’ I said and fumbled for the words to explain what I meant.

‘You said things that you have thought in your secret heart,’ Drake said. ‘You spoke aloud doubts that you have carried for a long time.’

‘Yes. No. But…’

‘Because you have doubts does not mean you are disloyal,’ Drake said. ‘It means you are human and that you are quite intelligent.’

I looked at him. It was not what I would have expected him to say. He always seemed a fanatic in his own way. He smiled. ‘I can assure you that dealing with doubt was one of the earliest parts of my training and the most comprehensive.’

‘They seemed very sure Macharius will go,’ I said. ‘One way or another.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Drake. ‘They ought to be. I have let it be known, through some informers we share, that Macharius has no intention of standing down.’

‘What?’

He raised an eyebrow. He was not used to lowly sergeants taking that tone with him.

‘We are surrounded by conspirators here. They need to be drawn out.’

‘Is that not rather dangerous? We are outnumbered by more than ten to one.’

‘Only if all the regiments unite against us. That will not happen.’

‘I wish I shared your certainty,’ I said.

‘You are assuming that all of Macharius’s potential replacements are prepared to work together, Lemuel,’ he said, sounding like a schoolmaster explaining the facts to a particularly dim pupil. ‘Even a most cursory examination of the situation will show you that is not the case. Simply because a man would like to replace Macharius does not mean that he will support another man’s claim to do so. Indeed there are many here who would rather see Macharius stay than have one of their rivals take his place. That is one reason the Lord High Commander has remained in command for so long.’

‘I thought it was because he was appointed to the task by the Imperium,’ I said.

‘There is no need to sound so sardonic, Lemuel. It does not suit you. Of

course, Macharius was put in charge, but many of those generals had no respect for the writ of the Imperium before he forced them to have. They were the most successful warlords of the Schism and many of them served the Imperium in name only and only when it suited them. If they did not fear Macharius and covet his position they might well go back to doing so.'

'Then you play a very dangerous game by baiting them.'

'Macharius will not live forever,' he said. 'That is a self-evident truth. Before that happens those who serve him must be brought to heel or the Schism will start all over again.'

My realisation of where this was all going must suddenly have become evident on my face. 'If they are found to be betraying Macharius, they will be discredited.'

He smiled, a teacher whose dim pupil has shown a sudden, unexpected flash of understanding. 'It's always good to have a reason to remove someone. It's even better if that reason is a true one.'

I wondered then at the cynicism of this man, and whether he realised that his own reach might exceed his grasp. The truth of it was that Macharius was surrounded by grasping, opportunistic, ambitious men, and Drake was not the least of them. The difference was that I could understand what it was that the generals sought. I could not understand what it was that motivated him.

'I seek what is best for the Imperium, Lemuel,' Drake said. I wondered whether he had read my mind or whether what I was thinking was simply written on my face for him to read.

'You are playing games with all our lives,' I said.

'It is not really your place to judge me, Lemuel,' he said. His tone was mild but there was steel in his voice.

'Someone has to,' I muttered under my breath.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I was not surprised to find Anna awaiting me in my chambers. ‘You look somewhat the worse for wear,’ she said.

‘It’s been a long night,’ I said, stripping off my tunic and sliding into the bed alongside her. She leaned forward and licked my shoulder. It was not in the least erotic. Nor was it meant to be.

‘Penthalium,’ she said. ‘And traces of Morathian anti-venom.’

‘You can taste that in my sweat?’ I asked.

‘Along with a lot of alcohol and some mild narcotics,’ she said.

‘It’s been one of those nights,’ I said.

‘You have just come from seeing Inquisitor Drake,’ she said, ‘and someone has been administering truth drugs to you. Given the age of the traces, it was not him.’

‘You are about to amaze me with your powers of deduction, are you?’

She smiled at me. ‘I am not your enemy, Leo. I may be one of the few people around here who is not, right about now.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘Inquisitor Drake is using you as bait in a trap for some very dangerous men.’

‘Did he tell you that?’

‘He does not need to. I can see the pattern of things as well as you.’

‘You’re doing better than me if you can see any pattern.’

‘You were abducted this evening and someone gave you truth drugs.

Presumably so they could find out what you know?'

'Very good,' I said.

'And what everybody is concerned about just now is Macharius and whether he will go to Terra.' She looked at me and I could tell she was reading me as she always could. 'That's only part of it though. It goes deeper than that. Since Drake is interested in all this, you are part of some scheme of his.'

Some movement of mine confirmed this to her, or perhaps she already knew. She was very well informed. 'He is using you as bait, feeding you information he wants others to pick up on.'

'Is that what you think?'

'Leo, don't try to deceive me. You are not capable of it. I know Drake is feeding disinformation to the agents of half the would-be Macharius replacements. It is his way. He will draw them out and then he will move against them. Or so he thinks.'

'What will stop him?'

'Look around you, Leo. Times are changing. Macharius is no longer secure on his throne. Drake is his shadow, whether he likes it or not. His star rose with Macharius. His star will fall with him, unless he makes a transition to standing behind someone else, whispering in their ear.'

'You think he would really do that?'

'You think he wouldn't? Drake is a political animal, Leo. They all are. You are in a tank full of mud sharks.'

'Of which you are one, if an exceedingly beautiful one.'

She looked at me rather sadly I thought, and considered her response for a long, nerve-wracking time. 'Yes,' she said. 'I am. But for my own small personal reasons I am inclined to keep you alive if I can.'

'That does not sound very cheerful.'

'Wake up! What is left of the crusade is sliding out of anyone's control. Macharius is a sick man. Drake is scrambling to try to keep the whole doomed structure from sliding over the edge of anarchy. The generals are pushing and tugging at it from all sides to try to get what they can. This is a disaster just waiting to happen, Leo, and you are standing right in the middle of it. You'll be right there when the earthquake hits and it all comes tumbling down.'

'So will you.'

‘The difference is that I already have a way to get out.’

‘I was offered one myself tonight,’ I said and then I stopped and wondered if her whole speech had not simply been a lever to get me to admit that. She showed me the sort of smile a wolf shows sheep.

‘By whom? By the agents of General Crassus? I would not put too much faith in them if I were you, Leo.’

‘I am not entirely stupid,’ I said. She reached out and ruffled my hair.

‘No,’ she said. ‘You are not.’

‘Anna,’ I said. ‘There is no way out for me. Whatever happens, I stand behind Macharius. I always have and I always will.’

She looked away for a moment and then said, ‘Loyalty has always been your strong point, for better or worse. You are loyal to Macharius and you are loyal to me in your way.’ There was nothing much I could say to that. ‘It will get you killed in the end.’

‘I am an Imperial Guardsman, Anna. I have already lived far longer than I expected when I signed up. And far better too. And that’s down to Macharius and to you.’

She kissed me then and we talked no more. There were other things to say and other ways of saying them.

The camp of the Seventh Belial lay on the edge of the city, beyond the circle of those great black starscrapers. In theory, I was simply visiting my old regiment. In practice it was a lot more complicated than that. There were still people there who remembered me, after all these years, although not so many as I would have liked, and I was wearing the green tunic of the Lion Guard, which both made my visit conspicuous and gave it a political undertone. All of the soldiers watching me wondered whether I could be spying or whether I was bringing word from Macharius to their officers. It was a tense little march.

I walked along the ranks of tents and pre-fabricated huts, between the lines of battered Baneblades and shell-marked Shadowswords and I felt a growing nostalgia. I stood in the silhouettes of the great armoured beasts and felt their power and buried rage. I sensed their animating spirits and their fury and I wondered if the time was coming when they would be unleashed on their fellow Imperial soldiers. Such potent armoured vehicles were rare on Acheron at this moment, and whichever side they were on

would have a huge advantage in any coming conflict.

Even as that thought occurred to me, I felt a growing fear in my belly. I was taking it for granted that not only was battle possible, it was likely. I was imagining a time when all of these men around me, my former comrades, would be my enemies. It brought back strange memories of Loki and the walking dead. Some of them, too, had once been comrades. Perhaps in this, we were all of us walking dead men.

I nodded to soldiers as I walked past and saluted officers who looked at me with cool, curious looks. There was a time when I would have felt daunted and resentful, back when they had been my social superiors from Belial and I was just a hive-boy who had joined the Guard. Now, I did not really care. I had spent more than half my life around aristocrats with far greater power than these men would ever have, whose families were far better connected, and I had not been so impressed by those. Why should I let these people intimidate me? And yet the fact that I still asked myself that question showed that it was important to me.

I headed towards the tent row and number that Sergei Krimov had given me. He was sitting outside, no doubt waiting for my two old friends Konstantin and Mikhail. I threw Sergei an ironic salute and took a seat outside the tent. We must have looked for all the world like off-duty soldiers, smoking and chatting.

‘Find out anything interesting?’ Sergei asked.

‘I just found out you don’t like sharing your booze,’ I said.

He produced a hip flask and passed it to me. ‘I see you’ve got over your reluctance to drink with me,’ he said.

‘Tell me, Sergei. How well do you know Konstantin and Mikhail?’

‘Well enough. Why?’

‘Are they for real?’

‘You mean can they do what they say?’

‘Yes.’

‘They can and you would do well to believe that. They have powerful backers, serious men with a serious agenda.’

‘And you would know this how?’ I asked.

‘You are the one asking me the questions. If you don’t like the answers it’s not my fault.’

‘How do you know them?’

‘They were with the Seventh right enough,’ he said. ‘They were promoted out to General Crassus’s staff years ago. Kind of like you were, only they rank higher and they do more than bodyguard work.’

‘You are making me feel inadequate,’ I said.

‘Look. I know you don’t like what happened the other night but I was doing you a favour. Play your cards right and you’ll end up rich and powerful.’

‘Just like you?’

‘Be the smart-mouth, but you are in this thing as much as I am, whether you like it or not. You said things you should not have said.’

‘You think that means I will do things I should not do…’

‘What are you trying to do, Leo? Talk me into thinking you want out of this? You could, you know. You would not live very long afterwards.’

‘You think – what if I went to Drake and told him what I know?’

‘Then you’d get me killed and maybe Konstantin and Mikhail and certainly yourself. You don’t think they can be tied to anybody higher up, do you? You don’t think they wouldn’t disappear, just the way you would be made to.’

‘All right, all right. You’ve made your point. I have another question for you…’

‘Fire away.’

‘How much do you expect to make out of this?’

‘I’ve already made enough so I could retire back to Belial and live like a noble.’

‘It doesn’t look that way.’

‘No. Not right now. But when this is over, I can assure you I will be out of here and away. You will be, too, if you play this sensibly. Look, we’ve seen all the high muckety-mucks get rich from these endless wars. Why shouldn’t we do the same?’

‘How rich are you going to be?’ He named a sum that made me whistle. He smiled and nodded and said, ‘Look, Leo – you and me are just pawns to these people. We always were. If it wasn’t us, it would be somebody else. This way we at least get something out of it.’

He sounded sincere, just a man looking out for an old comrade, trying to do his best in this mean, old world. Hell, maybe he was.

‘What if I wanted some proof of that up front.’

He nodded affably. This was something he understood. ‘I am sure that could be arranged, with a word in the right ear – leave it to me.’

I was sure that whatever he arranged there would be a cut included in it for him. I could not really begrudge him that. I handed him back his flask. ‘Let’s drink on that,’ I said.

The Red Lantern was the sort of place that soldiers came when they could afford it. Scantily clad women lounged around on red divans. I was greeted like an old friend by the lady in charge and shown through into a private room where I was met by Mikhail and Konstantin. They looked more affable than at any previous time I had dealt with them. I guessed that my session with the truth drugs and my asking for money had reassured them somewhat.

They passed me over a small pouch. It contained three tiny brilliant gems. I had seen their like before. On Belial, they could purchase a large part of a small hive if I traded them to the right person. They were tiny, easily concealed and incredibly valuable. It seemed that my new friends had taken my request quite seriously.

‘You can expect more if you play your part well,’ said Mikhail. He had a somewhat contemptuous manner now, that of a man who has bought and paid for something he expects to get the use of. Or maybe it was just the surroundings that put that thought into my mind.

Konstantin looked more conciliatory. ‘We are all on the same side here,’ he said. ‘We all want what is best for the Imperium.’ He looked and sounded as if he really believed that.

‘That remains to be seen,’ said Mikhail.

‘What do you want from me?’

‘Macharius has plans to defeat Richter,’ Mikhail said.

‘He does not tell them to me.’

‘If you hear anything you will let us know.’

‘I won’t hear anything.’

‘Don’t be so certain.’

‘If it happens, you’ll know,’ I said, ‘but don’t get your hopes up.’

‘If there’s anything else that seems relevant let us know.’

‘What do you deem relevant?’

‘Any plans Macharius might have, where he might go, who he might talk

to.’

‘He’s not doing a lot of any of those things right now. He spends most of his time in his chambers studying maps of Loki.’

‘There now,’ said Mikhail. ‘That was not so difficult. That is information worth knowing and for which you will be rewarded.’

Again there was a hint of a sneer in his manner. Again Konstantin stepped in, ever the conciliator. ‘Anything might be relevant, Leo. We need to know Macharius’s intentions and anything you might know about the people around him. What do you know about the Space Wolf presence on Acheron?’

‘I did not know there was one.’

They both looked at me as if they did not quite believe that. I shrugged and said, ‘The Space Wolves have left. There was a farewell feast. I was a cupbearer at it.’

‘So we heard. It’s one reason you are of interest to us.’ I considered that. Perhaps they did not intend to just kill me once they were finished with me. I could see how they might think that. I had enjoyed the favour of the leader of one of the most powerful and noble forces in the Imperium. They might think me a useful person to have around in case of any future dealings. I told myself not to get my hopes up. The Space Wolves were a long way away and likely to remain so.

‘So you don’t know anything about a small Fenrisian vessel in orbit over Acheron?’

‘It’s news to me,’ I said. ‘Whether it’s news to Macharius or Drake I do not know.’

I could see another reason for them to worry. If the Space Wolves were supposed to have left and one of their ships was still in orbit, who knew what that might represent. Any Imperial commander would be wary of offending the Adeptus Astartes. Perhaps they thought Macharius had cut some sort of secret deal with Grimfang. Hell, perhaps he had. My ignorance was very far from being entirely feigned. As a bodyguard you get to hear far more of what is going on in the Imperial headquarters than any normal soldier, but this does not mean you are privy to all of its secrets.

‘If you hear or see anything, let us know.’

‘How am I supposed to do that?’

‘Leave a message at the tavern for Krimov. He will set up a meeting.’

‘Very well. Is that all?’

‘No,’ said Konstantin. ‘We may as well enjoy what we ostensibly came here for.’

He pulled a long cord. The drapes swished open. Three women came in.

‘It’s getting worse,’ said Drake. He rose from the table, strode around the command chamber and studied the great map of the city. All of the armed camps and their commanders were marked on it.

Macharius sat hunched on his commander’s throne. He looked tense, not at all like the relaxed, effortlessly calm leader he had always been. He hunched forward, crooked his hands and then stood up himself. ‘What did you expect?’ he said.

‘It is a problem,’ the inquisitor said. ‘A real problem. There has been a six hundred per cent rise in disciplinary offences. Seventeen officers have been killed in duels. One has lost an eye. Three have lost limbs. Seven hundred and fifty-two enlisted men have been injured in brawls, one hundred and seven of them fatally.’

‘Those are not bad numbers for an encampment this size,’ said Lazlo, one of Macharius’s staff officers.

‘That was yesterday,’ said Drake. ‘Normally we would not see such a rate in a month.’

Lazlo looked as if he wanted to protest but did not dare. The inquisitor turned his attention back to Macharius. ‘It’s all part of the same thing.’

‘I know,’ Macharius said. He sounded distant, as if his mind were still elsewhere, dreaming up schemes to defeat Richter. It was the first time I could ever recall seeing him like this.

‘Surely the officers and commissars can bring this under control,’ said Lazlo.

‘They are part of the problem. The crusade is losing all cohesion. Our officers fight duels. Our commissars punish petty infractions of discipline and yet allow the rot to spread unopposed. It starts at the very top. The High Command is too busy jockeying for position to concentrate on any other problem. Their juniors are lax from want of supervision and communicate the ambitions and prejudices of their superiors to the troops. Followers of General Tarka and General Crassus turned their weapons on each other in the streets yesterday. They did not stop until their commissars shot sixty

men for disobedience of orders. Even then three commissars were killed.’

Macharius looked at Drake. ‘We all know there is a problem,’ he said sardonically. ‘The question is, what are we going to do about it?’

‘No,’ said Drake. ‘The question is, what are *you* going to do about it? You are our leader.’

Macharius appeared to consider this. ‘We have come too far,’ he said. ‘Our most experienced troops are old and tired. Our new recruits are untested and lack the zeal our veterans once had. Their officers are disillusioned by the venality of their superiors. It’s no wonder things are falling apart.’

‘Again, what are you going to do about it?’

‘I will speak directly to the troops. I will explain our plans. I will rally them back to the cause of the crusade.’

‘It will take more than words,’ said Drake.

‘Then I will give them more than words. I will lead them forward to crush Richter and his lackeys and after that we shall gather even these Halo Worlds into the Imperium’s embrace.’

I wondered at that. I wondered at how distant he now seemed from reality. He made it sound so simple. He would do this and the result would inevitably follow. It was the way he had always spoken and I had always believed him. Maybe the change was in me. Maybe I no longer had the faith I once did. Or maybe the magic of Macharius’s charisma had become stretched too thin over too long a time. Maybe it had always been a trick and only recently had I been able to see through it.

I pushed my doubts down into the dark cellars of my mind, but they kept trying to rise up again.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY

You say he has a plan?’ Konstantin asked. We were once again in the Red Lantern, seemingly met by chance, and in a private room. This time hookahs full of dream smoke had been produced to give a cover story for the lack of girls being summoned. Mikhail got them lit and even sucked away at the mouthpiece for a bit. I shook my head when offered one and stuck with the vodka.

‘So he says,’ I said.

‘And what would that plan be?’ Mikhail spoke now, ever the gadfly, ever mocking, ever seeking to provoke a response.

‘He declined to tell me,’ I said. ‘I could ask if you like. I’ll tell him you are interested and would really like to know.’

‘I am sure Leo is doing his best,’ Konstantin said. I noted the fact that I was Leo now. We were old friends, Konstantin and I. At least that was the implication. And Konstantin was on my side, or so he would have me believe.

‘Does Leo have even the faintest idea what the plan might be?’ Mikhail seemed to be mocking Konstantin now. I wondered if there was real needling there or whether it was just a very good act. It might have been a little of both.

‘No, but he seems convinced it will work. He plans to address the troops in three days. Perhaps all will be revealed then.’

‘That gives us three days,’ said Konstantin, dropping out of character.

‘And you didn’t see fit to mention this first,’ Mikhail said. He was glaring at me.

‘I was going to, but I thought I would enjoy a few more of your sneers first,’ I said. ‘They are always entertaining.’

‘Where will this address be given?’

‘In the Grand Plaza.’

The two of them exchanged looks. ‘He might be able to rally the troops to his side.’

I saw it then in the dismay their glances contained, and heard it in the awed quiet in their voices. They still feared Macharius. They still thought he had it in him to rally even the loyal followers of the conspiring generals to his side, if only he could speak to them. Having heard Macharius on numerous occasions I could understand their fears.

‘We’d best get word back to the general,’ said Konstantin. ‘He’ll want to do something about this.’

He turned and stared at me, all pretence of us being old friends and comrades gone. ‘Hold yourself ready. We’ll be in touch. This is where you earn your baubles.’

There was the same obvious undercurrent of contempt in his voice that Mikhail usually showed. I kept my face bland. I was about to find out exactly why they were hiring me.

‘They said the general,’ Drake said. His face was a mask but I had known him long enough to detect the unmistakable tone of interest in his voice.

I nodded. ‘A small slip,’ he said, ‘but perhaps an important one.’

‘They think that if Macharius has a chance to address the troops, he might be able to rally the crusade.’

‘They said that or is that what you think?’

‘It’s what I think, but I was there and you were not.’

Drake tilted his head to one side and studied me, an owl contemplating a particularly tasty-looking mouse. His mask remained in place, though. ‘I will trust your judgement on this.’

‘They might be right to fear it,’ I said.

Drake shrugged. ‘Once, perhaps. Now… I do not know.’ His shoulders had slumped and just for a moment I thought I caught a glimpse of a tired and desperate man. I wondered then at how old Drake really was. He did

not look any older than me, but he too had access to juvenat.

‘They told me to stand ready, that they would be in touch. If they are going to ask me to betray Macharius, it will be now.’

‘They will not ask you,’ said Drake. ‘They will order you. They think you are in too deep to back out.’

I felt a faint twinge of unease. ‘You think they will ask me to kill him.’

‘No. They cannot trust you enough for that or know whether you will do it. You will be involved and implicated,’ Drake said.

It came to me then that only he would know I was not. I could be executed as a traitor and no one would ever know differently unless he said something.

‘They might try to assassinate him while he speaks to the army.’

‘In full view of all the troops. That would make Macharius a martyr and anyone implicated in his death the worst sort of traitor.’ He sounded thoughtful as he said it and I wondered what was going on in the cold clockwork of his mind.

Looking back I can see that it was perhaps then that he got the seed of his last and most terrible idea.

‘You’ve brought the security codes and passwords?’ Mikhail asked. I looked around the now familiar chamber at the Red Lantern, taking my time just to annoy him, and then I nodded.

‘Good.’

‘And you will personally ensure that the lock is opened. We do not trust anyone else to do it.’ I had a sudden vision of me opening the great service hatch door and being shot down for my pains. I kept it to myself.

‘Of course,’ I said.

‘Once our men are inside, leave them and go your own way. It will soon be over.’

‘Very good,’ I said.

‘If things go well you’ll soon be a very wealthy man.’

Or I’ll soon be a very dead man, more likely, I thought.

‘Midnight tonight and everything changes,’ Konstantin said. He sounded elated, like a man on the verge of realising a long-held dream. Or perhaps a man about to wake up from one.

Midnight found me at the great armoured door on the upper level of the palace. I had dismissed the sentries and stood waiting with the shotgun on my back, wondering for the thousandth time what in the name of the Emperor I was doing. I had the same fluttering feeling in my stomach I have had many times before in the lead-up to a battle. My mouth felt dry and my heart thumped against my ribs. I held up my hands and they were steady. I checked the chrono on my wrist and the smallest hand ticked down towards the stroke of midnight. There were still a couple of minutes to go.

I thought about my life, of all the long mesh of moments that had led me to being in this place at this time. I felt the faint spark of excitement as well as fear, that feeling that something was about to happen, that I had better be alert or I might die, that I was taking my life in my hands. It's a feeling that once experienced is never forgotten, which can be as addictive as any drug.

My mind conjured phantoms. There could be an army out there approaching in the night. There could be an unstoppable horde of assassins. I pictured a vast conspiracy out there in the darkness. I saw tanks revving their engines and soldiers grabbing their weapons and a cabal of trusted generals preparing to strike against their former commander. I was caught at the sharp end of all that. I could be executed by either side for my role in this.

For a moment, I felt as if I were in free-fall. I just did not care. There was nothing I could do but keep my eyes open and my wits about me. It was the only way to survive. I had been doing it for a very long time.

The second hand, the minute hand and the hour hand all reached the same spot at the same time. I opened the door and stared out into the night. At first it looked as if nothing was there, but then I saw a black outline of a Valkyrie gunship and shadowy shapes moving in the darkness. I knew I was outlined against the light and an easy target. I beckoned once and stepped back out of the line of sight.

Black figures scurried forward, moving with professional skill, the ease of men long trained for their task. I backed away and they moved into the light, dark-clad, masked, heavily armed. I became aware of a knife glittering in a man's hand. I levelled my shotgun and said, 'Be careful where you point that thing.'

'Are you mad?' a voice asked. I thought it belonged to Mikhail. 'If that thing goes off it will be heard right through the floor.'

‘Then you’d better do nothing that will make it go off,’ I said.

‘You’re not a very trusting man.’

‘You are the one with a knife in his hands. I would prefer it stayed there and not between my ribs.’

‘You’ve done your job,’ Mikhail said. I recognised the shifty look in his eyes now, just as I recognised Konstantin’s huge form looming behind him.

‘And I intend to live long enough to collect my payment.’

‘You’ll do that,’ said Mikhail. I suspected that if he had his way I would not live a moment longer than I had to.

‘We can stand here all night and bicker or we can get on with things,’ I said. ‘The choice is yours.’

‘Lead on,’ he said. I prodded him with the barrel of the shotgun.

‘You go first,’ I said. ‘If a knife should somehow find its way into my back, the shotgun will go off and your head and any chance of surprise will go with it.’

He nodded. ‘You think you’re clever, don’t you?’

‘Move,’ I said.

We moved quickly and quietly through the top floor towards Macharius’s apartment.

‘It’s very quiet here,’ said Konstantin from just behind me. ‘I don’t like it.’

‘It’s past midnight and the Lord Macharius requires quiet for his rest. If you like I can summon some servants and you can explain to them what we are doing here.’

He said nothing. I knew that behind us armed men were fanning out through the upper floors of the palace, prepared to bring silent death to anyone they encountered. I prayed that Drake knew what he was doing. I began to entertain a strange fantasy that Drake was the traitor, that his entire plan to entrap the assassins was merely a flimsy excuse to get me to open the door and let them in. It sounds strange now, but at the time with a company of killers at my back and the palace turned into a silent death-trap around me, it was an oddly convincing idea.

‘How much further?’ Mikhail asked. He sounded a little nervous. I would have been too, creeping through a palace with the assassination of an Imperial hero on my mind and a shotgun pointed at the back of my head.

‘It’s just ahead,’ I said. And it was. It felt like a strange dream to be

approaching Macharius’s chamber with so many armed strangers around me. I took another breath and counted to seven in my head as I let it out. I was all too aware now that each breath might be my last and I was determined to enjoy them.

We approached the doors and Mikhail stopped. ‘No guards,’ he said. ‘There should be sentries here at least.’

He turned to face me and the knife was raised menacingly in his hand. I sensed Konstantin behind me. I stepped away, putting my back to the wall, and looked at the pair of them.

‘I’ve done my part,’ I said, wondering where Drake and his men were, wondering where the others were, wondering what I could say that would keep me alive for another few moments.

‘You’ve betrayed us,’ said Mikhail. He moved closer. There was a glittering madness in his eyes. I wondered if he had taken any combat drugs before coming here tonight. ‘You fool!’

I swivelled the shotgun to point at him. ‘You have a knife,’ I said. ‘I have a shotgun. I would think twice about calling anyone a fool if I were you.’

Konstantin chose that moment to spring. He moved very quickly for such a big man. The butt of my shotgun had less distance to travel though and it connected with his jaw as he moved. There was a snapping sound as the hinge of his jaw broke.

Mikhail threw himself forward, knife blade glinting in the glow-globe light. It flickered out, aimed at my stomach, point up. He was going to rip towards my heart. I brought the shotgun down, parrying, deflecting the blade. It ripped my trouser leg, and drew a line of blood along the top of my thigh. I hoped he had missed a vein.

He pulled the knife back for another stab. I was lucky. The others had not quite understood what was going on, were still trying to keep the silence so they did not give away the intrusion. That would not last.

I brought the shotgun up, knowing I was not going to be quick enough to stop him. It was not my intention. I intended to take his head off even if he got me through the heart. He saw it in my eyes, the certain knowledge of his own death, and he froze for just the second I needed. The shotgun was pointed at his head. From all around came the sound of a muted struggle and silenced shots. It seemed like Macharius’s men were there doing the work after all.

A second later Drake emerged through the door, with Macharius behind him. He raised his hand and Mikhail slumped, a victim of the inquisitor's psyker powers.

Anton and Ivan emerged from a side corridor, a prisoner struggling between them. Drake nodded, satisfied. 'I think we've got enough for our purposes. Let's get down to business.'

He sounded satisfied. We had members of the Seventh Belial caught within Macharius's palace, engaged in an obvious assassination attempt. By the time Drake had finished with them they would no doubt be prepared to confess publicly to anything.

'We don't have much time,' Drake said.

Macharius shook his head. 'We have enough. I've already given the orders to begin the assault on Crassus's palace.'

'Is that wise?'

'Are you going to give me some advice on strategy now, inquisitor?' Macharius asked. There was a note of sardonic mockery in his tone. We raced to the roof, where the Valkyries were waiting to whisk us across the city.

We jumped into the troop carriers and swiftly took to the skies. The mirrored black starscrapers blurred around us. I wondered how many vehicles were out there, running without lights. I wondered if below us drunken soldiers were looking at the skies and wondering about the sleek shadows passing overhead. Perhaps they had already looked up this night and seen Crassus's assassins pass. It seemed impossible to believe that those people down there could have missed the secret war that had erupted in the night.

I looked over at Ivan and Anton. They were hunkered down near Macharius and Drake. The Lord High Commander looked utterly relaxed. I thought of all the ways we could be blasted from the sky. All it would take would be one shot from a Hydra Flak Tank – the enemy would not even have to know Macharius was on board. It just needed one man to fire an anti-aircraft weapon and we would go down. I prayed Macharius's legendary luck would hold at least until we were on the ground once more when I could trust to our skills and weapons.

There are few situations more frightening than hurtling across the night

sky in a flyer knowing that at any second a stray shot might kill you, that the slightest miscalculation on the part of the pilot might send you plunging to fiery doom ploughing through the side of a building. It's the not having any control over my own fate that unsettles me.

Ahead of us now I could see fires burning on the peak of a black pyramid, and scores of raptor-like shadows swirling around the building as gunships strafed it. Some of those vehicles were descending and we moved to join them.

Dust swirled into the sky and flames danced away as the Valkyries displaced air. I jumped out of the door, shotgun held ready and scanned the rooftop. I could see no sign of resistance so far. In the distance I could hear klaxons howling and searchlights beginning to probe the sky. Down there was an army that was starting to wonder what was going on, who was attacking it and why?

I raced across the flat rooftop as the rest of the group tumbled out and moved to join me. Drake's storm troopers were already crashing through doors. From below us came the sound of combat.

At that moment I felt an odd sadness descend on me. That which I had most dreaded had come to pass. Imperial soldiers were once more fighting against Imperial soldiers as they had done in the Schism. It seemed as if something had broken that could not be repaired, that even if Macharius were victorious he was in a sense defeated. The long balancing act that had kept him at the top of the crusade had finally failed. Forces had been unleashed tonight that would tear apart the unity he had worked so long and so hard to create. It would not be possible after tonight to even pretend that the army was united. If it had been Cardinal Septimus's plan to undermine Macharius he had succeeded. What was worse was that Macharius had done his work for him.

We smashed through the palace. If Macharius's grasp of the big picture had loosened, his ability on the smaller scale was intact. We stormed through the building with overwhelming force and savagery, taking prisoners by the dozen. What we did not find was General Crassus. He was gone.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Macharius stood in Crassus's apartments and surveyed the scene of his latest conquest. He looked calm but he was quietly furious.

Drake looked at the hidden doorway behind the cabinet full of ancient statuettes and said, 'Escape route.'

'It goes somewhere,' Macharius said.

'My men are already investigating that.'

'He's gone somewhere.'

'I am getting reports from the space field that a shuttle has taken off.'

'Not his personal shuttle?' asked Macharius.

Drake shook his head. 'Order the field closed if you wish.'

'Too late now,' said Macharius, 'and it would not make much difference anyway. A small craft could be launched from elsewhere on the surface of Acheron.'

'We need to think about what we are going to say,' Drake said. 'We don't have a prisoner to parade in front of the troops. We can still declare him a traitor.'

Macharius shook his head. 'If he had been captured, you could have made him confess. As it stands we have nothing to show.'

'We need to say something. The other generals will wonder what is happening.'

'Let them wonder,' Macharius said. 'I will make my speech tomorrow. No one will try anything until after that and then we can settle things.'

The day of the great speech dawned. Macharius dressed in his most impressive uniform. A dirigible dropped him into the central square of Acheron city, onto a platform set between two massive Baneblades of the Seventh Belial, a deliberate echo of earlier speeches he had given when the crusade first began to drive out between the stars. If any of the tank's crews wondered what had happened to the commander of their battlegroup, they gave no sign.

In the square tens of thousands of men had assembled. They were there to provide a backdrop for a speech that would be recorded by technical cherubim and broadcast to the entire crusade.

Macharius looked much as he had ever done, tall and impressive, a living avatar of war. His gaze was keen, his back was straight, his face like that of a hawk. He did not look nervous as an ordinary man might when about to speak to the assembled armies of the crusade. He had done this before. He was confident that he could do it again.

He stepped out onto the platform and raised his arms above his head. Where once this might have been greeted with a thunderous cheer, it was now met with a watchful silence. Rumours had been swirling around the camp, about the attack on Macharius, about Crassus's flight. Men were wondering what was going on. The peace down there was a fragile thing.

If the quiet daunted Macharius he gave no sign. I took up my position on the edge of the platform watching the crowd as he spoke.

All eyes were on Macharius. Whatever else they felt about him, he still commanded the attention of the assembled regiments as no one else could. I studied faces through a magnifying lens, ostensibly looking for would-be assassins and troublemakers, in reality curious.

The regiments out there were the old guard of the crusade, those that had been with the generals longest, the core of the advancing armies of the Imperium. Every man out there was a veteran or serving alongside veterans. Of all men, they were the ones whose support Macharius should have been able to rely on. They belonged to forces that had fought for the crusade since the very beginning.

And perhaps that was the problem. The faces I looked upon belonged to men who were tired and old and far from home. Most of them did not have access to the juvenat that I had; most of them did not have access to the medical care I had received. They were scarred and wounded. Some of

them had crude prosthetics. Some had eye-patches. They looked like hard, deadly men but they also looked like what they were, men who had spent long lives of fighting. They were not the fanatical youths who had set out all those decades ago to rebuild the Imperium and end the Great Schism.

In this I think Macharius misjudged them. He had lived with all the privileges of command. He still wanted more worlds to conquer. His thirst for glory was undiminished and his zeal for the reconquest of the worlds of Man still burned bright. Once it had made him perfectly in tune with all his warriors. Now it made him something else.

'Comrades,' he said. 'We have come far together and we will go further yet.'

He spoke in that confident, confidential way he had. He was not the supreme commander issuing an order. He was a fellow soldier explaining what had to be done. It was a trick of speaking he had that had served him well for a very long time. Perhaps it would serve him again now. He waited, but there was no acclaim, no cheers, no sign that his huge audience was going to respond to the inspiration of his presence.

He made a small gesture of dismissal, shook his head slightly. He smiled. He was not going to let this cool reception put him off from saying what needed to be said. 'We have come to the edge of the worlds that men knew in the time when the Emperor walked among us. We have travelled even beyond those. We have added new realms to the Imperium and we can be proud of that.'

I saw one or two heads nod. The men out there were proud. They knew what they had done and were reminded of their shared achievements. They knew that Macharius had led them to those triumphs. I saw one or two men stand up straighter, prepared to give the general a hearing. Even that filled me with a sense of wrongness, though. They should not have needed to do that. Once all of them would have hung on his every word, been stirred to martial pride by his merest gesture. No more. They just looked at him, some of them hollow-eyed.

'We are gathered together for one last great push,' Macharius said and at last he got some response, a faint murmur of approval, but I sensed it came more from his use of the word *last* than anything else. These were men seeking an end to their labours, not new duties. 'We shall leave Acheron, crush our enemies and add more realms, cover ourselves in new glory,

march to new and greater triumphs.’

And there he lost them. He kept speaking, building word pictures of great victories and hundreds of new worlds added to the Imperium, billions of souls redeemed from darkness, of triumphs that would be remembered for as long as the Imperium endured. And the more he spoke, the more he conjured up dreams of victory, the more restless the troops became. They had fought and fought and fought. They had watched their comrades die. They had come to a place where the rules as they knew them had stopped working, where the powers of old Darkness stirred. They were not interested in more battles. They wanted to rest.

They did not cheer as Macharius spoke. They did not raise their voices in acclamation. The Lord High Commander’s words were like stones dropped into an abyss. They simply vanished. By the end, even he seemed to realise this. The great speech ended and nothing had been gained.

One way or another the Great Crusade was over. I looked at Macharius and felt sorry for him. His dream had died while he was still alive to see it.

I noticed that Crassus was being painted out of the great mural showing the triumphs of the crusade. The artisans had been dismissed as Macharius had summoned his commanders but the message was clear.

One by one, the generals filtered into the room, accompanied by their staff. Crassus was conspicuous by his absence. Cardinal Septimus was conspicuous by his presence. Those servo-skulls whirling around him seemed to wear the triumphant grin he denied himself.

Under the circumstances I was surprised that any of the generals had shown up. If I were in their shoes I would have feared removal or assassination. Perhaps that is just a comment on the way that I think.

Some of those supremely powerful men looked sullen. Some of them looked defiant. Some of them looked ashamed. None of them looked afraid. Macharius sat on his command throne and surveyed them all. He did not look angry. He looked weary. Of all the men there only Cardinal Septimus looked as if he might be happy with the way things had gone. He still wore his secretly self-satisfied air.

Macharius looked at the generals and they in turn stared back at him. It seemed as if no one wanted to be the first to speak. There was a sense of bitterness and betrayal and broken promises in the air. Things that had

simmered away in the background, that had been kept down by Macharius's long unbroken track record of victory, were at long last coming to light. I saw something else too. Each of the generals looked with as much hostility on his companions as he did Macharius. They were all rivals and none of them knew where the others stood.

'Has it come to this?' Macharius asked at last.

'The men are on the edge of mutiny,' General Tarka said. 'Even the commissars doubt their ability to motivate them.'

I saw it then. It was not just each other they were afraid of. I think each one of them saw the potential consequences of their actions rise up to thwart their dreams. If these regiments, the proud core of the crusade, could rise in mutiny, then other regiments could. And no one wanted to light that particular fuse.

Macharius did not say anything. 'Where is General Crassus?' Fabius asked. 'I do not see him present.'

'Alas he will not be joining us,' said Macharius. 'It seemed he, too, was on the edge of mutiny and then he stepped off.'

A ripple of shock passed around the room. 'Apparently he lost faith in my leadership,' Macharius said. 'I doubt he was alone in this.'

His gaze passed from one to another of his former lieutenants and not one of them could meet it.

Cardinal Septimus could barely keep from rubbing his hands together but when he spoke his voice was soft and respectful.

'Now is a good time to return to Terra and enjoy your triumphs, Lord High Commander. Let another take up your burdens.'

It was like throwing raw meat into a pit full of dinogators. All eyes turned towards the representative of the Imperium. In every cold brain, swift calculations were being made. If Macharius stepped down, he must have a successor. There was glory to be had in leading the crusade, even if it was weakened, even if it conquered no more worlds. Indeed, I am sure that many of those present thought that the current state of the crusade was a reflection of Macharius's leadership, that with *them* in command it would go on to new heights. I saw the fires of ambition light in five pairs of eyes. I saw them glance around and measure potential rivals and allies.

'No,' said Macharius. Suddenly those baleful fires were dimmed as the generals turned to look at their commander.

‘No?’ said Septimus. His voice was soft, but there was both menace and an undercurrent of glee in it. It appeared Macharius was about to disobey a direct order from the Imperium.

‘No,’ said Macharius. ‘Richter remains and he is a threat to the Imperium beyond measure. I must settle matters with him before I depart.’

‘How will you do it if the armies are on the verge of mutiny?’ Septimus asked. ‘It would be madness to risk it.’

‘I do not need the armies gathered here. I can do it with the Lion Guard and the troops of my personal battlegroup.’

‘With all due respect, General Macharius, you have been trying to do that for two standard years and you have failed.’

‘I will not fail this time,’ said Macharius, with utter certainty. ‘By the time your ship is prepared to return to Terra, the matter will be settled.’

I could tell that no one there believed him. They thought it was a delaying strategy of some sort.

‘You really think that is possible?’ Septimus asked. He could not keep the disbelief out of his voice.

‘I would bet my life on it,’ said Macharius. I felt a sudden resurgence of faith in him. If Macharius said he was going to do this thing, he would do it. Or die in the attempt.

Cardinal Septimus stood silent for a moment. The skulls orbited around him as he considered his options. He squared his shoulders and allowed a smile to spread across his face. ‘You shall have your last campaign then, General Macharius, and afterwards you will return to Terra with me.’

The generals departed to plot and try to instil some semblance of discipline in their unbelieving armies. Macharius departed to make preparations for his return to Loki. As we left the chamber, I turned and saw Inquisitor Drake deep in conversation with Cardinal Septimus. Just for a moment they looked like conspirators. It was disquieting.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Beneath us once more I could see the murky globe of Loki. The crusade had returned to settle with Richter and his minions once and for all. Macharius had announced that he would be victorious here if it was the last thing he did. It was time to put his plan to the test.

All around us the command deck hummed, but it was a bleak parody of the way things had once been. There had been a time when reports would have been coming in from hundreds of distant worlds scattered throughout an entire sector of the galaxy. Now they were concerned only with this one world and its occupants. It showed the terrible narrowing of focus as the energies of the crusade dissipated in internal strife.

Now the holo-sphere showed only the great murky orb of Loki and the two satellites that orbited it, the huge skull moon and the tiny, speeding lesser one. Inquisitor Drake studied them intently as if by staring hard enough he could somehow divine the course of the future. The rest of the commanding officers watched warily. Macharius smiled grimly to himself, in possession of a secret that only he knew, but which would decide all of our destinies.

‘Niflgard is once more in the hands of our enemies. It seems we will be starting again from scratch,’ said Drake. He was fishing for information.

‘It will not be so for long,’ said Macharius quietly. ‘Once Richter and his staff have fallen.’

Drake shot him a puzzled look. ‘What do you mean?’

Macharius gestured to a tech-adept and the view zoomed in to show the

area over which we had fought so long and hard previously. Massive armoured citadels lay in a fortified ring. Each was a fortress city holding tens of millions of people. Each had the industrial capacity to supply a dozen armies.

‘Niflgard was to be an advance base for a conventional campaign. We needed its hive factorums to provide munitions and material, to supply our war machine, to compensate for the long supply lines. We wanted the world’s resources. We don’t need them any more. What matters most is that we settle matters with Richter and the powers that stand behind him.

‘Previously we got bogged down in endless warfare fighting the way our enemies wanted, to our own disadvantage. Not this time. This time we attack Richter directly.’

‘But that ring of citadels is impenetrable. It is impervious to the most potent orbital bombardment of the greatest fleet. You yourself said we would need to take it on the ground.’

‘I was wrong,’ said Macharius. ‘There is another way. We will drop from orbit into the centre of the ring and strike the head off the monster.’

Drake looked at him as if he suspected Macharius had gone mad. I could understand why.

‘We don’t have twenty Chapters of Space Marines,’ the inquisitor said. ‘We will die like flies on the ground. You said you no longer wanted to waste the lives of our soldiers. Do you intend to throw them all away at once in some grand gesture, to martyr yourself for the Imperium?’

There was an odd tone in the inquisitor’s voice, as if he did not entirely disapprove of the ideas to which he was giving voice. I noticed that the Naval officers nearby were listening intently, a kind of calm curiosity written on their faces. They could afford to feel that way. They would not be trying to force a beachhead on the surface of Loki in the teeth of the defences of those fortified mountains.

Macharius laughed. It was a merry sound with no hint of madness in it but it did not reassure me. ‘I am not ready for death yet, my friend,’ he said. ‘Not until I have settled scores with all my enemies.’

Looking back now, it seems to me that he gave Drake an odd look when he said *all my enemies.* At the time what I noticed was that the calm assurance of his words made all the listeners shiver. He was completely certain of what he was doing. It was like listening to the old Macharius who had

always been the still centre of the storm of battle around him. The difference was that I had changed. I no longer shared the Lord High Commander's self-belief. I had allowed myself to doubt my complete faith in him, and once that had happened there was no going back to the old ways.

'We are going to destroy those fortresses,' said Macharius. 'And here's how.'

He outlined his plan, crisply and clearly. It sounded like madness, but as I listened I found myself starting to believe again. It might, after all, just work.

The sorcerer-enginseers of the Adeptus Mechanicus had finished their work. Their ships departed from the surface of the lesser moon. I stood beside Macharius and Drake and the others and watched their ships return to join the body of the fleet.

'How long?' Drake asked. His voice was sombre.

'The drives will be activated in the next cycle, then we shall begin.' He turned to speak to his staff officer. 'I want everyone ready to go within the next twelve hours.'

'All troops are on standby. The shuttles are ready. We await only the coordinates for landing, sir.' He stood tautly to attention and was clearly waiting for Macharius to reveal the landing point.

'Very good,' said Macharius dismissing him. 'I want my personal shuttle ready to spearhead the attack on the ground. I want all the men to know I am going with them. I will be on the ground, sharing the risks.'

I listened intently. Anton caught my eye. His face was a blank mask but I could tell what he was thinking. If Macharius was going to be on the surface, I was going to be there too, and so were Anton and Ivan.

Macharius issued the final orders and then we were left alone with him and Drake. 'You are playing this close to your chest,' Drake said. 'Do you still suspect there is a traitor among us? Another Crassus, or something worse?'

Macharius shrugged. 'I do not know where we will be landing… yet. I will not know until the divinatory altars tell us where we can set down and that won't be for another four hours.'

The hours crawled by. Macharius and Drake and his upper echelon of command sat in his grand stateroom and surveyed the greenish, polluted

outline of the world below them. They smoked and drank like condemned men. I think all of them felt that Loki was going to be their graveyard. It had been an unlucky place for Macharius, the crusade and the Lion Guard. We had fought there for so long and to so little effect that no one quite believed that this time it was going to be any different.

And yet, for all that, they sat there tense and drawn, ready to respond to any command. No matter how the rest of the crusade now felt, these men were still ready to follow Macharius to their deaths.

'What if it doesn't work?' Inquisitor Drake asked. He sounded worried. All of the officers gathered in the chamber looked at him as if he were expressing a heresy.

'It will work,' Macharius said. 'I have every faith in the Adeptus Mechanicus. Their scholars have performed every calculation a thousand times. All of the engines are placed correctly. There will be no mistake.'

At that point the moon was on the far side of the planet, hurtling along its final orbit. I looked at the chrono on the wall and realised that very soon now we would find out whether Macharius's plan was going to work or whether his final desperate gamble was going to fail. The man himself showed no sign of being worried. If there were any doubts in his mind there was no clue to that fact upon his face. He glanced around at all of his sub-commanders and smiled.

'There is no need for all the long faces, gentlemen,' he said. 'I want you all to be prepared to descend upon the surface of Loki at a moment's notice and to destroy the heretics there with complete and utter ruthlessness. Now is not the time to have any doubts. Now is not the time to show mercy. Now is the time to seize victory for the Imperium with our own hands and to show the watching worlds that the crusade is still a force to be reckoned with.'

One by one the officers around the table appeared to relax. One by one they became infected with the confidence that their leader showed. It was just like the old days when Macharius had seemed invincible and just for a moment it seemed that he was once again the unbeatable strategist that we had believed him to be.

'I don't like this,' Inquisitor Drake said. 'Too much can go wrong. Too much has been left to chance. What if the enginseers have failed to take some factor into account? What then? You will not have another chance to

do this.’

Again Macharius smiled. ‘There is no one more aware of that than me, I assure you, inquisitor. I also assure you that if something goes wrong we will have lost nothing. We will be no worse off than we were before. And if things go according to plan – which they will – then we will have crushed the most vile citadel of apostasy and wickedness in this sector. We will have demonstrated to all of those who doubted us that we are still a power to be reckoned with.’

There was compelling force in his words, but I wondered as I listened whether he was talking about the crusade or himself when he was talking about the doubters.

The hands of the chrono circled just as the moon raced around the planet. The shape of the planet floated within the holo-sphere, as if seen from a distance somewhat greater than that at which our fleet orbited. On the far side through the world’s ghostly representation I could see the red dot that represented the lesser moon. It was three-quarters of the way around the planet now and I wondered whether or not it had performed this partial circuit much quicker than its previous ones.

Drake’s eyes were focused on it almost obsessively. He might have been watching the last seconds ticking down to his own execution. He seemed completely wound up to a pitch of nervous tension that I had never seen him at before, almost feverish in his excitement.

At the time I wondered whether it was simply nervousness about Macharius’s chance of regaining the leadership of the crusade in one mighty stroke. He had spent decades attached to the Lord High Commander’s cause to the point where its success was identified with his success and its failure with his own. In many ways he had as much riding on the coming campaign as Macharius himself.

Silence filled the room and the only sound was the occasional cough of a nervous officer. Occasionally someone lit a lho-stick. Someone drummed his fingers on the table top until he noticed and stopped.

‘Twenty minutes,’ an officer announced. Macharius nodded and looked at the holographic representation for a moment. An expression of satisfaction passed across his face even though he could not have seen anything more than the rest of us. He was still a supreme actor and this might be his last great show.

Minutes stretched out like hours. I was aware of the drumbeat of my own heart. All the officers stole stealthy glances at the globe and its hurtling satellite. This three-dimensional representation began to change now. It zoomed in to show the small moon in greater detail rushing across a quarter-section of the planet. A tech-adept made some adjustments and for a moment I caught sight of the pockmarked surface, so like that of a large asteroid, except that huge machines had been placed at various points on its surface and those machines were now surrounded by the eerie glow of ancient drives slowly drawing more and more power into themselves.

Drake barked an order and the technician hurriedly changed the point of view again. Now we could see that the circling moon had begun to shudder slightly and deviate a little from its orbital path. Perhaps it was an illusion, but it definitely seemed to be picking up speed.

I heard one officer gasp as if he could not quite believe what he was seeing. The moon was definitely changing course now and it had begun to move downwards towards the planet's surface. I found that I was holding my breath awaiting the outcome of this last titanic throw of the dice. I looked at the chrono again and suddenly it seemed as if the hands of the clock had raced forward, gaining speed like the moon, for there was less than one minute left on the timer.

A comet trail of vapour was starting to form around the lesser moon now. Drake drummed his fingers on the table. 'This is where it could go wrong, if they have miscalculated and performed the invocations wrong.'

I suspected he meant that the atmospheric turbulence might cause the moon to deviate from its trajectory. Even a slight change in its course would mean it would land hundreds of leagues off target. Even as he spoke the words the moon was changing colour. Trails of red and yellow plasma joined the greyish vapour. It was heating up like a shuttle decelerating into the atmosphere. I wondered if there was anyone down there looking up at the night sky now. Perhaps they would think they were seeing a large meteor. If there was any gap in the clouds they might witness something strange and unnatural, the satellite that had been orbiting their world for millions of years drifting out of position, hurtling downwards towards them like a hammer wielded by an angry god.

I imagined the dead men wandering across the shell-churned landscape and looking up with their greenly glowing eyes to witness this terrific

descent. I stared at the image of the moon. It was surrounded by a red halo now, as it began its final fall. The mountains seemed to rise to meet it as it descended through the clouds, and then came the moment of impact.

I held my breath. For a brief heartbeat, almost impossibly, nothing seemed to happen. The thought skittered across my mind that it was impossible. Millions of tons of rock accelerated to such terrific velocity must have some effect. The point of view of the sphere pulled back and I saw shock waves rippling out from the point of impact, as if a man had smashed into a mud ball with a hammer. Mountain ranges bent and tumbled. The moon burrowed into the cold crust of Loki like a bolter shell seeking a heretic's heart.

The whole area of the planet's surface around it seemed to be being pushed inwards by the enormous impact. Lava lines appeared as the fiery heart of the planet spilled out in a huge wave that would destroy anything in its path. An enormous mushroom cloud of dust rose skywards, obscuring everything from sight.

For long, long minutes everything was silent. I think everybody, even Macharius, was appalled by what we had witnessed. In our mind's eyes we were all imagining what it must have been like to be at the focal point of that vast impact. We waited and we waited and we waited for the dust to clear, for the divinatory sensor images to stabilise so that we could see what had happened.

Terribly slowly it all became clear. The ancient moon had smashed the crust of the world, toppling mountains, destroying fortresses. The land over which we had fought so bitterly for so long had been swept clean of earthworks and emplacements by a tidal wave of shuddering earth, the ripple of the planet's skin, leaving huge new heaps of rock and dust and rubble. Niflgard was gone, a child's sandcastle kicked over by an angry giant. Even the most distant of the heretic fortresses had suffered terrible damage. Their armoured carapaces had been cracked open. They looked like vast termite mounds that someone had riddled with autogun bullets until they had fallen apart.

Clouds swirled everywhere, contrary to any normal weather pattern, their movements driven by the awesome turbulence caused by the staggering impact.

'There,' Drake said. His pointing finger stabbed out to indicate something.

By some strange chance, or perhaps by design on the part of Macharius, one gigantic hive citadel was left standing, its surface ruptured but its structural integrity intact. It stood now on the edge of a vast crater from which an immense red-hot cliff-spire emerged. I realised it was a fragment of the shattered moon. It must have broken up on impact and been tossed scores of leagues through the sky. ‘That is Richter’s citadel.’

The earth around it was a maze of new canyons, where the earth had folded and rippled. In the midst of a new valley was a large flat area. ‘Then that is where we must go,’ said Macharius. He turned to the officers. ‘Be ready for action. We descend when the land has cooled and the air turbulence settled.’

The officers leapt into action. In a moment the chamber was clear of all except Drake and Macharius and their bodyguards. Macharius said, ‘Now we shall see what we shall see.’

He strapped on his chainsword and picked up his bolt pistol and made ready for his final battle.

As we raced through the ship, I thought I caught sight of a familiar face among the officers watching us head to the shuttle. It raised a hand to wave to me and I thought I saw a fleeting expression of sadness; then it was gone, vanishing in the direction of the shuttles.

Anton caught the look on my face. ‘What is it?’ he asked. ‘You look like you’ve seen a ghost.’

It was not a ghost, it was Anna. She was on the ship again, moving in disguise through the corridors. No doubt she had intended for me to see her, because she could easily have concealed herself in a hundred different ways had she so wished. Was this farewell?

‘Nothing,’ I said. There was no time left to stop and explain. No time for me, no time for her and no time for any of us.

We joined the rest of the Lion Guard within the shuttle and waited for the warning klaxon to sound, telling us it was time to descend once more to the surface of Loki. A feeling of dread filled my heart at the thought of it.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The shuttle, massive as it was, shook on the way down. Atmospheric conditions were still not settled after the moon-strike. I stared at the faces of my companions. They were all partially concealed by rebreathers but their eyes looked grim.

It seemed to take forever until the shuttle touched down. It hit the ground with a shudder and then vibrated as the ramps were lowered. A moment later we were heading down onto the soil of the world we had vacated what felt like a short lifetime ago.

The first thing I noticed was how cold it was. Loki had never been exactly tropical, but now it was chillier than it had been in the depths of winter. The dark clouds in the sky that obscured the sun might have had something to do with that. It felt almost like night even though dawn had already risen in the east. No stars were visible. Unconsciously I looked for the hurtling lesser moon but, of course, it was no longer to be seen nor would it ever be again.

There was a strangeness about the advance down onto the planet's surface. This was not an area we had ever reached during our original advance. It was too deep in the enemy heartland, surrounded by a maze of fortified trenches and citadels. Now there was no sign of any work of man. The ground had a crumpled, crumbled look, as if a huge hand had dug its fingers in deep and squeezed. As far as the eye could see were ridges and deep craters and vast blocks of splintered moon-rock. Fires burned all the way to

the horizon. Some were distant volcanic eruptions, and others were hive cities venting gas and chemicals in sheets of flame a kilometre high.

Shadows danced everywhere. Our breath came out in clouds. Tiny motes of dust or perhaps disease spores swirled everywhere. The headlights of armoured vehicles caught the dancing particles. Some of them glittered, though I have no idea why.

We hit the ground hard and fast and moved to establish a perimeter. We needed to establish the beachhead as quickly as we could. The heretics had not responded and there was no guarantee that they would, but we could not count on that. Company by company, squad by squad, the spearhead of the crusade dispersed across the shattered landscape, digging in where it could, establishing strong points, guard posts and lines of sight for artillery and armour and heavy weapons.

A converted Baneblade had been made ready as Macharius's mobile headquarters. It had been requisitioned on Acheron from the defeated remnants of Crassus's forces and hastily repainted in Macharius's colours. It was equipped and fuelled and I was to be its driver. It felt good to be back behind the controls of a Baneblade once more, making the invocations, feeling the great beast come to life beneath my hands. It gave me a sense of nostalgia, as if I were back at the beginning of my career and not at its end. Ivan and Anton were my gunners once again. Part of me felt that this would be an appropriate ending, and part of me knew that was not a healthy thought.

I was glad I had my bucket seat. The inside of the Leman Russ was crowded and not just with crew. We were carrying Drake and his bodyguard. It seemed Macharius did not want to be parted from his great advisor at this late stage.

In a way it was a sad sight that greeted us. Where once there would have been thousands of armoured vehicles, now there were barely hundreds and those had a battered, hastily made-ready look to them. Most of the tanks were Leman Russ Exterminators or Vanquishers; the remainder of them were Chimera troop carriers. Once the force was assembled at the bridgehead we roared off across the landscape towards the last standing citadel of heretics on this world.

Macharius wanted his reckoning with Richter and he was going to have it.

It was not a huge distance from our landing site to the citadel, a matter of a score of leagues, a distance that a Leman Russ battle tank was capable of covering in a matter of hours even over this broken terrain.

The land around us was as bleak as the surface of a moon. The sky remained dark save where the clouds were underlit by the eerie glow of distant firestorms. The ground was rough and we bounced and shuddered along. All the time Macharius responded to incoming reports from his commanders.

I listened as he briefed the column commanders, telling them where to go and what to do. So far none of them had met any resistance, which was hardly surprising in the aftermath of the moon-strike. I wondered how long that would last. I doubted anything could live through the colossal impact but then, in the past, on Loki, we had not only fought against the living.

Ahead of us the new ridgelines rose towards the horizon and on that horizon loomed the jagged hive citadel that was our ultimate destination. There was something strange about it, a warped look that was not simply a product of the impact shock. Looking at it I thought the place had always been twisted. It had been built that way or had become so over the long years since it had been constructed.

Things were starting to grow around us. Slimy luminous moulds covered the boulders, like veils of greenish mucus. Large mushrooms glowed spectrally in the gloom. I wondered if they had always been here or whether the impact had brought buried things from deep underground to the surface.

Here and there were the broken bubble domes of what once might have been hab-bunkers. Gigantic pipes emerged from the soil like broken and empty veins protruding from an amputated limb.

Black snowflakes swirled around us. Perhaps they were not snow, but that is what they looked like and it was certainly cold enough. I intensified the spotlights so I could see to drive by and kept us heading in the direction we had fixed upon, as visibility dropped to almost zero and I prayed to the Emperor we did not encounter a chasm opened by the fall of the moon from the sky.

Suddenly we emerged from the murk. The black flakes swirled away and I could see ahead once more. The landscape was even more broken, the way forward running through huge gullies over which needles of rocks stood guard like sentinels.

We passed huge drops and chasms and I knew we were slowly gaining altitude as we advanced. In the distance the citadel loomed larger, and appeared ever more twisted. More reports came in telling of figures sighted in the distance. Perhaps they were refugees, perhaps they were survivors, or perhaps they were something different. It did not matter now. The important thing was to reach our destination before the enemy became aware of us.

All of this was part of Macharius's plan. He knew that all communication on Loki as well as all of the sensor networks would be disrupted at this moment in time. He also knew that our enemies would be much more concerned with dealing with the disaster than with any possibility of attack. The planet had just taken the single most powerful attack it had ever received, something far more powerful than an orbital bombardment, and it was unlikely that even if anyone spotted us that the enemy would be able to respond. It would be far too busy dealing with the disaster.

At least that is what we hoped and believed.

We came to rest on a ridge overlooking Richter's citadel. The fortress had taken an enormous amount of damage from the moonfall. The great armoured carapace had been cracked and there were gaping holes inside the structure from which greenish fluid poured. Fires blazed in the side of the building and clouds of poisonous-looking smoke rose to mingle with the dust in the air.

The place looked more like a living thing than a building. It had an organic look reminiscent of an insect hive, as if it had been grown rather than built, and it looked diseased. Great bulges emerged from its sides like tumours and long tendrils of living tubing, like veins or intestines, flowed over it. Sphincters as large as city gates pumped out loathsome effluent.

In areas where the external walls had been ripped away by the impact, it was like viewing a body whose skin has been ripped away by a grenade explosion. There was a suggestion of fleshiness to the rockcrete and hints that the internal structure was reinforced with something more like bone than metal. It had the hallucinatory quality of something seen in a drugged nightmare. Looking at it, I could not help but think of the gloating daemon face I had seen leering down in my dreams.

'What is that?' I asked. It was a breach of discipline but no one took me to task.

‘I do not know,’ said Macharius. His voice was quiet and calm, but I sensed unease in it, perhaps for the first time in my recollection.

‘It looks like the work of the Ruinous Powers,’ said Drake, very quietly so that no comm-net would pick up his words. I shivered. In my experience those were not things that any sane man would choose to encounter, although its presence here explained a lot of things.

‘Nurgle,’ the inquisitor said, and the word made it sound as if he were clearing his throat and spitting. Once again terror swirled somewhere in the depths of my mind when I heard that name. ‘Lord of Plague.’

He was talking more to himself than to anyone else now. ‘That place will be a disease pit,’ he said.

‘Our men are as well protected as they can be. They have rebreathers and full body covering. We cannot let fear keep us from covering the last kilometre.’ Clearly Macharius was not about to retreat now, whatever Drake said. ‘We have broken the walls, destroyed the defences.’

‘Have we?’ Drake asked.

On the walls some of those great blister turrets were swivelling to bring their weapons to bear. ‘It looks like some defenders are still alive within the place.’

The turrets fired. A great explosion tore the cliff top not too far from our location. The Baneblade vibrated at the shock of the impact. I put the vehicle into reverse gear and pulled us away from the edge. The explosions might set it to crumbling away and send the tank tumbling to its doom in the valley below. Macharius was already giving orders for the remainder of our column to do the same.

We were fortunate that the citadel had been so heavily damaged. If more of those great weapons had survived we might have been destroyed along the ridgelines. As it was casualty reports came pouring in; it looked as if we had lost many men and vehicles.

‘What now?’ Drake asked.

Macharius looked calm, but there was something strange about his voice. ‘We regroup and prepare to advance once more. You saw how damaged the citadel was. We can take it. This is the closest we have ever come to doing so. I will not be denied victory at last.’

There was a note of almost maniacal obsession in his voice. He wanted victory and he was prepared to pay any price to get it.

We may have been out of line of sight of the citadel's batteries but we were not out of range. Shells arced down out of the sky to raise new craters all along our line.

The enemy gunners did not know where to aim but sometimes their shots hit home anyway, churning the landscape, raising new dust clouds to add to the fug in the air. Looking back, I suppose they had no real idea of where we were. It was most likely they were simply firing in panic, but at the time it did not feel like that. When a shell smashed another Leman Russ to pieces, it was as if we were being personally and individually targeted by foes who knew exactly where we were.

'They let off a thousand shots for every one that hits,' Macharius said. He was right, of course, but it did not make me feel any better. It was always possible that we would be the ones that sheer random chance selected to be the next victims.

'That will not matter if they have enough shells,' said Drake.

'Then we shall just have to hope they do not,' said Macharius. He began to give orders to the force. As ever he did not really need a holo-sphere to be able to envisage a battlefield. He carried the information in his head.

A vast explosion lit the sky.

'Take us forward and let's have a look,' said Macharius. I obeyed his command and began to edge the Leman Russ back towards the crumbling ridgeline. I peered hard through the gloom, all too aware that the ridge might have disintegrated under the impact of all those explosions.

As we reached the edge I saw that more gaps had appeared in the side of the citadel and a few of the turrets had gone.

'A magazine explosion,' Macharius said. I could picture an eruption in an ammunition dump with the huge explosion tearing through the loading tunnels built to feed those huge turrets with shells. Of course, it might not have been any such thing. It might simply have been a power-core exploding. In any case, the citadel looked dead. The turrets in its sides did not swivel. Many of the visible lights had failed as if the systems had collapsed. Even as that happened the comm-net kicked back in and we could hear the chatter of reports coming in through the static.

'It looks as if we might have got lucky,' said Drake.

'It is a trap,' said Macharius.

'You think they staged a magazine explosion to lure us forward?' There

was obvious disbelief in Drake's voice.

'No, I think Richter is taking advantage of the explosion to do that,' said Macharius. 'I know how he thinks.'

'Can you lead us into his trap and out again?' Drake asked.

'Let us see,' said Macharius.

We rumbled down into the huge crater valley left by the aftershocks of the moonfall. A piece of the shattered satellite loomed over us like a fallen mountain. It still steamed despite the cold of its surroundings, or at least it looked that way.

Long lines of armoured fighting vehicles made their way down narrow ridgelines into the chasm. Ahead of us the shadowy bulk of the great hive citadel rose like a hungry ogre. It felt as if a vast hungry daemonic presence was looming over us, waiting for us to fall into its clutches. I wondered at Macharius's confidence. He seemed totally untroubled, even though he knew we were driving right into the teeth of an ambush.

In my mind's eye, I pictured the huge daemon I had seen during my fever dreams. I told myself I must still have a touch of the fever, but that was not it. There was a very real fear in my heart, and a terrible sense of foreboding in my mind. My mouth felt dry, my heart hammered against my ribs. I made myself concentrate on keeping the drive treads pointing in the wrong direction. Having the Baneblade slide off the ridgeline would kill us all just as quickly as any shell-blast or manifesting daemon god.

Macharius gave the order for the tanks to fan out as soon as they completed the descent. He did not want a vehicle being taken out along the ridgeline and blocking our advance, leaving us helpless prey trapped on the approaches. Once we were in the area between the ridges there was space to spread out so that individual vehicles did not make such tempting targets.

Looking ahead I could see the slope rising to the side of the hive. Once there had been roads and mono-rail tracks there, but now the roads were worn away and the rail-lines were just tangles of twisted girders. The land up there was broken by great menhirs of tumbled rockcrete. Rivers of burning chemicals flowed down the sides of the hive and polluted slime trails bubbled out of broken vents. From close up, the hive looked less like one vast monolithic structure and more like a collection of jumbled features on the landscape. Its sides were pitted and fissured. The great gaps loomed

ahead of us like enormous chasms.

Some of the tension had drained out of Drake. He looked almost relieved. Perhaps Macharius had been wrong about the trap. ‘We need to get inside and begin to cleanse this place of the last of the heretics,’ he said.

The words had no sooner left his mouth than lights flickered on once more in the hive citadel and the great turrets on its side began to swivel on their mounts.

‘Indeed, we do,’ said Macharius.

The batteries opened fire, tearing chunks out of the landscape around us, sending the shattered metal remains of main battle tanks hurtling into the sky. Wreckage rained down all around us along with dust and soil and broken rockcrete. New craters appeared where the munitions struck.

I could feel the vibration of the explosions through the hull of the Baneblade. The darkness around us was shattered as our forces returned fire. Battle-cannon shells sleeted down on the enemy position. They had no effect on the huge armoured structures.

‘Forward,’ Macharius ordered. I wondered if he had gone mad. His intention was clearly to get us under the arc of fire of the enemy batteries into the dead zone that they could not reach, but I doubted it would work. The turrets were set at measured distances to each other so that they could cover each other’s blind spots. We might get below the angle of fire of the forward turrets but the ones further up the hive’s sides could still shoot at us.

Huge shells thundered down from on high. They destroyed more of the Leman Russ. Because of the formation’s dispersal they could not get them all or quickly.

‘To the left,’ Macharius said. ‘Lemuel.’

It took me a moment to realise he was speaking to me but I did as I was ordered. A shell hurtled by overhead and tore up the rockcrete to our right. I did not ask how he had known. Macharius could read a battlefield like no man ever born. Perhaps knowing where the shell had been about to descend was just part of his talent. I had seen him do similar things before.

‘Keep moving to the left,’ he said. He spoke a string of commands into the comm-net, telling other vehicles to follow more or less our path. The shells continued to hurtle over us, tearing up the terrain to our left and behind us

and it slowly dawned on me as I followed Macharius's instructions what he was doing.

The turrets had been set up to be able to cover all of the approaches with multiple redundancies set in. Under normal circumstances there would be no way through without being hit by an inferno of shell-fire, but these were not normal circumstances. The hive citadel had been badly damaged, with the bulk of the turrets taken out already. There were blind spots in the enemy's arcs of fire and there was a pathway through. With one view of the hive side from the ridgeline Macharius had plotted it. There were still terrible killing zones but they could be avoided and once through we were relatively safe.

At least I thought we were; then I noticed that there were lights moving on the side of the hive and things were coming out through the gates and taking up position on the citadel's sloping sides. I upped the magnification of the driver's periscope and saw that they were Basilisks and something that looked like a Hydra modified for anti-tank service with an open turret mounted on the chassis. The fixed turrets might not be able to hit us but the mobile artillery was moving into position to attack. It seemed Richter had anticipated Macharius's move. We had merely exchanged one form of killing ground for another.

The enemy opened fire. Explosions once more lit up the sky, shattering the darkness. All around Leman Russ burned, reduced to heaps of slagged metal. We returned fire at the enemy hull on the ridges above us.

It was impossible for me to tell exactly what was going on. I had a very limited perspective of the battlefield from my driver's position. I knew only that Macharius calmly continued to give orders and respond to the enemy's attacks. From what he was saying I sensed that some of our drivers had panicked and left his carefully chosen route up the hive side. I thought I could hear screams and explosions over the comm-net.

Even as that thought occurred to me the hail of fire intensified around us. A shell impacted on the side of the Baneblade. I felt that moment of sheer stark terror you always get when you've taken a heavy impact in an armoured vehicle.

This is it, I thought. I am dead. I'd seen too many nasty brew-ups in tanks, far more than enough to get my imagination working overtime. Sparks flew around the cabin and a terrible clanging sound of repeated impact on the

side of the vehicle all added to my panic.

‘What the…’ I heard Anton say.

A smell of burning filled the inside of the cockpit along with gouts of smoke.

‘Everybody out!’ Macharius ordered. I undid the harness holding me in the driver’s seat and scrambled for the evacuation hatches. All around me things sparked and burned. An army of evil possibilities invaded my mind: I saw us stuck within the burning tank by hatches that refused to come unsealed, the magazine might detonate at any minute if the power-core went up, and another hit might come lashing out of the darkness as the enemy concentrated their fire on the crippled tank. I held my breath against the smoke and the possibility that each breath might be my last.

I flipped open the escape hatch and tumbled out into the cold night of Loki.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

And it was cold. Loki had always been cold, wet and cheerless but this was something else. The effect of the moon-strike had dropped the temperature significantly. The dust cloud covering the sky and blocking out all sunlight had changed something. This was the sort of cold that brought snow and blizzards in other worlds. My breath came out in clouds. At least there was a source of heat behind me. The Baneblade had caught fire.

Macharius had pulled himself up through the top of the turret and had turned to aid Drake. The two of them jumped clear. One of Drake's bodyguards leapt behind him. Anton and Ivan joined me.

'Get clear,' I shouted. 'The thing's going to brew.'

I did not have to tell anybody twice. I turned and fled over broken ground. The strain of running warmed me against the chill. There was a crawling sensation between my shoulder blades. I was free of the burning tank but I had found something else to be afraid of. The tank might explode or it might not. In any case it was a beacon for incoming fire and the enemy had already proven it had weapons powerful enough to take out a Baneblade. To make matters worse I was running towards a firestorm of explosives. I had bailed out on the side facing the fire zone of the big turrets. They were tearing up the earth ahead with huge explosions.

I dived flat behind a boulder and moments later I was joined by Ivan and Anton. Anton still clutched his sniper rifle in his left hand. He had paused in the middle of bailing out to grab it and had somehow managed to get it

through the escape hatch. There was dedication. Or idiocy. Most likely the latter.

‘You showed a clean pair of heels,’ Anton said. ‘Looked like you were trying for the regimental running championships. I’ve never seen anybody flee so fast. I thought there was a dust cloud rising behind you.’

‘You seem to have kept up,’ I said.

‘Never fancied going up in a brewed-up tank,’ Anton said.

A huge explosion rocked the dark from off to our left. It was not a shell from one of the turrets. Anton stood up, his lanky form casting a long shadow in the light of its burning.

‘Yep, there she goes,’ he bellowed.

‘Get down, idiot boy,’ I said.

Shrapnel clattered off the rock.

‘Why?’ he asked. ‘They are not shooting at me.’

‘No,’ I said, ‘but those guys might start.’

Moving downslope was a mass of heretic infantrymen. They had bayonets attached to their lasguns and they looked anything but friendly.

‘Good point,’ Anton said. He brought the rifle up to his shoulder, aimed through the sight, snapped off a shot and dropped back into cover all before I could tell him not to. We were isolated on the slopes of Richter’s citadel with no help in sight and facing off against a regiment of heretics and, of course, he had to draw their attention to us.

‘You had to draw their attention to us, didn’t you?’ I said.

He showed me his idiot grin. ‘Suppressor on the sniper rifle makes it difficult to see, and if they could hear me shooting over this racket they have better hearing than an Anatarean devilhound.’

Something about his confidence made me smile. ‘Sometimes I suspect you might not be as stupid as I thought.’

‘I am touched,’ he said.

‘Sometimes I think you are even stupider.’ He nodded, stood up and took another shot then another and then another. I stood up and risked a glance. In the flickering darkness, at range and without a sniper-scope, it was difficult to see what he was shooting at. It was not difficult to see the enemy though.

A horde of them was out there, thousands upon thousands, armed with every form of man-portable weapon I could think of. They moved to the

beat of great solemn drums, with the mindless collective will of insects swarming to defend their hive. I thought of the walking dead we had fought and the truth is I could not see much difference between them and these living soldiers. The heretics might still be breathing but they seemed just as mindless and just as insanely brave.

Of course, that is not necessarily an advantage on the field of battle. There is a time for bravery as there is a time for turning tail and fleeing. The heretics were moving into position to face a battle-line of Leman Russ battle tanks. The tanks' weapons blazed and cut them down.

'This is madness,' Ivan shouted. I thought about it for a second. He was right. Even if the heretics had just a small hope of taking out a Leman Russ, it did not stop some of them advancing and trying to use grenades. 'They don't have a chance.'

From above us, the enemy field artillery kept shooting and I realised what was going on. 'They're not meant to have a chance. Richter, or whoever is in command here, does not need to keep them alive. They are a distraction. They're there to keep our lads' attention focused on killing them while the enemy artillery does its job.'

'A masterly summation, Lemuel,' said Macharius. He and Drake and a group of Drake's bodyguards dropped into the shell-holes around us. How had the inquisitor summoned them, I wondered? They must have been close by, to have found us in the chaos.

'Surely you can order our tanks to return fire.'

'I have,' said Macharius, 'but if they do that the infantry will swarm over them. In their numbers, with grenades and melta bombs, they will inflict heavy casualties.'

He was right and there was something he was not saying, which was that no matter how well disciplined a tank crew might be, they were not going to ignore an immediate threat to their own safety in order to concentrate on those distant batteries. Whoever had ordered this suicide attack had known what he was doing. 'What are we going to do then?' Drake asked.

'Whatever we can,' said Macharius. 'But our first order of priority must be to silence those guns.'

All around us artillery spoke in voices of thunder and tanks replied by spitting spears of fire. The earth shook. The cold air swirled. The chanting of the heretics throbbed. Macharius continued to speak into the comm-net. I

saw figures begin to converge out of the gloom. They wore the green of the Lion Guard, but their uniforms were torn and bloodied. Many of them had been wounded, but they were prepared to fight alongside their commander. If we were lucky there was perhaps a company of us. The Emperor alone knew how many men waited for us up at those gun emplacements.

That was at the moment though. I felt sure we were going to find out.

Macharius gave it five minutes for the crews of the destroyed tanks to converge on our position along with infantry from the brewed-up Chimeras. They came out of the shadows in twos and threes, moving cautiously along the ground, using every scrap of cover. Their caution was warranted. The enemy had other things to do, but if they had noticed those stragglers they would have taken the few seconds required to wipe them from the face of the planet.

We assembled on the edge of a blast crater, and Macharius spoke. His voice carried over the cacophony of the battlefield, clear, precise and thrilling. ‘Our comrades are pinned down and under assault by the foul heretics on the hill,’ he said. ‘We are going to do something about that and then we are going to enter that hive and put an end to this war once and for all.’

His voice held no doubts, only absolute certainty of victory, and I could tell from the faces of the men around me that they all believed him. No matter what doubts they might have had back on Acheron, they had none here. They could not afford to have them. They were under fire and facing superior numbers. They *needed* to have faith in the man leading them if they were going to come through.

‘We are going to wipe out those heretics in the name of the Emperor, and we are going to cleanse this world of all evil.’ He made it sound so easy. We were just going to march up there and settle the matter. No matter that we were outnumbered ten thousand to one.

‘You are all chosen men – picked by me, selected for your courage and your skill in soldiering. Those deranged madmen up there are no match for true soldiers of the Imperium. And we are going to show them that.’

And we were. All of the men stood taller, breathed more deeply, held their weapons ready to fight. Macharius continued giving out orders and we listened and made ready to obey.

When he gave the command we moved out.

Macharius had read the battlefield as if it were a map. Our route along the flanks of the rising ridgelines kept us away from the bulk of the enemy horde and out of line of sight of the guns. Even if we had been noticed, we would not have seemed like much of a threat to the heretics. They were concentrating all of their attention on the Leman Russ below us. Most of the tanks had withdrawn to use what cover the ridgelines provided. Their lack of mobility would soon leave them easy targets for the oncoming infantry. At close range, grenades could smash the drive-cogs of the tanks. Filter covers could be wrenched away and explosives dropped down the pipes. At very close range a tank without infantry support becomes extremely vulnerable.

As we clambered up the hillside I paused for a moment to look back. Below us the great green and brown stain of the enemy infantry raced downhill. A number of Leman Russ tanks hull down on the broken ridges of the hive's side blazed away at them. Huge towers of rockcrete dust erupted around the tanks as a human wave of screaming diseased bodies threw themselves forward to die beneath their tracks. Above us, the artillery blazed away from their emplacements.

Macharius led us, crouched low, moving forward and upward with no sign of fatigue. His bolt pistol was in one hand, his chainsword in the other. The ground was broken and churned, the light uncertain, the footing dangerous and yet he picked his way forward with absolute sureness. I advanced as fast as I could to catch up with him and Drake. It was my duty to be there and defend him and to do that I needed to be close.

Anton and Ivan followed in my wake, scuttling along on hands and knees, moving ape-like through the darkness, keeping out of sight. We progressed up the side of the hive, moving from cover to cover, from extruded ventilation tower to impact crater, moving sometimes through fissures and sometimes in the shadow of great leaking sump pipes.

Beneath me the ground shook, and not just from the impact of the shells. It was like being an insect scuttling over the skin of some great beast and feeling the beat of the heart and the rasp of breathing beneath. The hive citadel was still functioning. Systems down there still worked. Sweat stained my tunic. Condensation had begun to form within my rebreather

mask – I could feel it running down my cheeks. My lips tasted salty when I licked them.

Guns were firing somewhere off to our left. At first I thought Macharius had misjudged our path as he led us ever higher but then I realised it was not so. He was moving us into a position where we could get to the batteries' defenders and, hopefully, take them by surprise. We were going to need to do that. It was just about the only advantage we would have.

Macharius stopped. He crouched in the shadow of an industrial pipe, looking down upon the gun batteries below us. He studied them carefully, head tilted to one side as he tried to gauge the weaknesses of the enemy position. It took him only a few heartbeats, then he extended a finger.

'Lemuel, take those dozen men and attack that gun when you see the signal flare.' His hand indicated Anton and Ivan and a group of other green uniformed troops. All told there could not have been more than a hundred men with us and we were attacking ten times our number. Macharius never let little things like that stop him, though. His eyes narrowed. 'Destroy as many other guns as you like but leave that one intact.' His fingers stabbed out indicating the one second-nearest to our position.

'Yes, sir,' I said. The others nodded. He gave instructions to the rest of the men and his plan was clear – we would attack the flank of the enemy position closest to us and destroy as much as we could. It would certainly disrupt the battery's fire on the Leman Russ below but it would probably not do much for our health. That was hardly an objection though. We were doomed unless our tanks broke through and overran the position. The enemy would simply destroy them and at some point they were bound to notice we were here.

Once the orders were given, I looked at my men and gave the signal to move out. We scuttled downslope and headed towards the enemy.

It was dark. The only real illumination came from the muzzle flare of the enemy guns and the huge explosions caused by the turrets above us. They kept firing regardless of the fact that there were no real targets for them to hit. Most of our surviving tanks were in their blind spots. Those that weren't had not survived. In any case, they did not seem to be suffering from any shortage of ammunition.

The slope was cold and slippery. Some of the rocks were razor-edged.

There were trenches and furrows left from the moonfall impact that were invisible until you were almost on top of them. They were only intermittently visible in the flash and glare of the guns and you needed to remember where they were in the periods of darkness as you advanced.

To make matters worse, our own boys were not exactly inactive. The Leman Russ kept up a hail of punishing fire on the heretics. Some of their shells went astray and arced down near our position.

'It would be just my luck to live through a brew-up and be killed by a shell fired by my own side,' said Anton. His voice cut through a sudden silence on the battlefield.

'Some of those boys down there know you're up here,' said Ivan. 'They're not aiming at the guns at all.'

'Ha-bloody-ha.'

'Quiet, idiots,' I said, making a chopping gesture with my hands.

'Yeah, because they are going to hear us from down there while they are deafened by their own gunfire.'

'No,' I said, 'but they might hear us when we get closer. Anton, find a place where you can cover us. The rest of us are going in. We need to be able to rush the place when we get the signal.'

'I get the boring job again. It's not fair.'

'The Emperor help us all, I am relying on you to give us cover.'

I could tell he was grinning by the way the scar writhed across his forehead.

'So it's come to this,' grumbled Ivan. 'We are dependent on Anton. We're doomed.'

The flare rose over the enemy position, lighting everything up in its brilliant glow.

'Move!' I said.

We raced downslope, keeping to cover. Ahead a few of the heretics were staring up at the flare, wondering what was going on. Most of them were concentrating on shooting. Gunners stared into sights, fiddled with loading mechanisms, muttered technical prayers over their weapons.

None of them had thought to look behind them and I prayed to the Emperor that none of them decided to do so now. I glanced off along the ridgeline. There were a score of guns there along with their crews. There

did not seem to be anybody else. All of the heretics who could be spared were below us, charging under the tracks of our armour.

I charged forward, shotgun at the ready, followed by Ivan and the rest of my improvised squad. No one paid any attention. No one expected such an attack and certainly not by such a tiny group of men. We had almost reached the enemy gun when someone looked up. He did not pay any attention to us at first, probably assuming that we were heretics like himself, but then he did a double take. It was the last thing he did before I turned his head into bloody mush and removed it from his shoulders.

I pumped the action of my weapon and readied another shot. Anton opened fire and one of the enemy gunners slumped forward over the side of the weapon. His companion turned and said something to him, then pushed him, shaking him by the shoulder as you would a companion who has fallen suddenly asleep; then he noticed the blood on his hand…

Anton's next shot took him in the head and sent him tumbling backwards. Most of his companions continued to fire but one or two of them had noticed something was wrong. An officer turned to glare at us and reached for his sidearm. I pulled the trigger and he collapsed in a welter of blood and entrails.

The rest of my squad opened up and more of the enemy went down. Then we were among them, carried by the momentum of our rush and our enthusiasm for killing. It might have been my imagination but I thought I heard the sound of more shots being fired in the distance. It was difficult to tell over the roar of the guns and the thunder of battle.

A man jumped at me, screaming, aiming a heavy metal power tool at my head. As he did so, another heretic raced towards me, raising an autogun.

I sprang to one side and aimed the shotgun as I fell. Autogun fire chewed up the ground where I was standing. The jumper, worse luck, landed on the far side of the trace of fire and came towards me.

I aimed the shotgun at the man with the rifle and pulled the trigger. The weapon kicked against my shoulder. The shooter fell, his legs cut off at the knees. He screamed and let go of his gun. I twisted, pumping the shotgun as the man with the huge spanner swung it down, intending to shatter my skull.

I wasn't fast enough. Even as I swivelled the shotgun to bear on him, the power tool had begun its downward arc. I tried to twist myself to one side

but slipped in the blood and dust.

My attacker's head exploded, covering me in brains and body fluids. It happened as if by magic and I wondered for a moment whether Drake had used his psyker powers. Then the same thing happened to another member of the gun-crew who was drawing a bead on Ivan with his sidearm and I realised that my saviour had been Anton.

On his own he seemed to be doing as much damage as the rest of us. I realised that in our own way, on a smaller scale, we were doing what those heretic fanatics down in the valley were doing, providing a distraction while a distant lethal attacker wiped out the people fighting against us.

Bodies fell and we surged up to the gun. Even as we did so, a line of blazing fire cut in front of us. An enemy Hydra, deeper in the position, went up in a ball of hellfire. I glanced over at the gun on the extreme left of the battery and it had wheeled on its mount and was firing across the emplacement and into the other heretic guns. Macharius had seized the first gun and turned it on our enemies. I could see him standing on its side, partially covered by its armoured shield, directing fire deeper into the enemy position.

I laughed and ordered my men to get behind the controls of the weapon we had seized. Soon it too had been turned on the enemy position. It was part of Macharius's plan that we would not be discovered too soon. The enemy were concentrating their fire on the Leman Russ below and any of their own weapons that went up would be taken as victims of the tanks' response, at least to begin with.

Our captured gun roared as we joined in, sending bursts of armour-piercing shells tearing through the enemy position. In the rage and confusion of battle, we managed to take out all of the enemy guns in our line of sight before anyone noticed us. There were still guns firing at our troops down below but they were out of sight, hidden from us by the curve and roughness of the ridgeline.

A moment later, Macharius came racing up with the rest of his bodyguard. 'Very good, Lemuel,' he said. 'Now we must repeat this at the other side of the emplacement.'

'Nothing is ever easy,' muttered Ivan from my side. Anton came loping down from the hillside to join us. He had a satisfied air about him, that of a man with a job well done.

‘I got twelve of them,’ he said as he reached my side.

‘Only a few million more and we’re done then,’ I said. He nodded pleasantly, as if he had no doubt in his ability to kill that many and it was just another day at work. It was all right for him, I thought sourly. He did not have to get into close combat with these heretic frakkers.

‘Soonest done, soonest we get some beer,’ he said.

‘And where the hell are we going to get beer in this forsaken place?’ I asked.

‘Maybe the heretics will have some,’ Anton said, ever hopeful.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

We moved along the ridgeline, skipping from the tangled remains of one destroyed enemy gun to the next, using them for cover, killing any of the enemy wounded we encountered. As we rounded the bend, we saw more enemy guns emerging from an arch in the hive side as well as more infantrymen. An unending stream of heretics seemed to be coming from that gate.

I took a deep breath. There was no way we could fight our way through so many of them and no way that they could fail to notice us once our attack began. There were thousands of the enemy pouring out from underground. I realised that even if we had killed ninety-five per cent of the population with the moonfall there were still millions of enemy below us. Not all of them would be soldiers but even if it was one in a hundred we were still colossally outnumbered.

I turned to Macharius for guidance. ‘Sir?’ I said.

‘Take the nearest guns,’ he said. ‘Turn them on the gate. Close it.’

All hope left me. Even if we closed the gate there were still thousands of the foes out there on the ridgeline, more than enough to put paid to our small force. All we could do was lay down our lives so that our comrades would live. Our own were already over.

‘Right you are, sir,’ I said.

The one good thing about being such a small force was that nobody noticed

us at first. I doubted I would have if our positions had been reversed. I mean it was madness for fewer than a hundred men to attack an enemy with fifty times their number.

Of course, we had some advantages. Most of the enemy ordnance was pointed at ninety degrees to us, firing down into the huge battle going on below, and that's where most of the enemy attention was going as well.

I saw officers ordering their men to the front line. They were moving in columns through gaps in the ridgeline, heading down into the battle below, an endless line of human sacrifices offered up to the hungry gods of war, by a High Command who did not care whether they lived or died. I felt a sudden flash of sympathy for them that I quickly quashed. That was no attitude to enter a battle with.

Macharius looked up at the sky as if he expected to see something, glanced at the chrono on his wrist and then gestured for us to begin the attack.

We advanced taking advantage of every patch of shadow, every scrap of cover. We did not want that vast army of enemy faces turning in our direction until the absolute last second.

Anton took up position amid the smashed remains of one gun, lying along its twisted barrel, allowing himself to peek out over the top and set his rifle. Anyone looking at him in the bad light would most likely see only wreckage. They would have to be looking directly at his rifle to see the muzzle flash as well, and if they were looking at it that way they were most likely dead anyway. It was a nice choice for a sniper's nest and it meant that Anton would most likely outlive the rest of us by a couple of minutes. Until he ran out of ammunition. Even if he wasn't spotted he would be a lone Imperial soldier on a battlefield surrounded by heretics, in sub-zero conditions, on a world where plague was all too common.

I dismissed that thought. It was pointless worrying about Anton. I had my own skin to think about and Ivan's and Macharius's.

The Lord High Commander loped forward like a great stalking cat. In the thunder of battle he did not need to creep silently but I knew he was doing so. He moved as if there were every chance of an alerted enemy sentry overhearing him and still managed to outpace the rest of us.

Next to him was Drake. The inquisitor glided forward over the ground, as if his feet did not quite touch the ground, and when I looked I could see no prints in the dust. His cloak fluttered around him; his shadow performed a

sinister dance behind him in the flickering, multi-sourced light. His ten remaining bodyguards moved along in his wake, silent as ever. Some ancient techno-magic had darkened the mirrored face-guards of their helmets so they would not give away their positions. They held their weapons ready to use at any moment.

I wondered if they were still the same guards that had followed Drake back on Karsk, back at the start of our adventures with Macharius. I had never really spoken more than a few words to any of them, never seen them off guard, and never got to know them. I thought perhaps the movements of some were familiar, but that might just be the product of similar training. I was most likely going to die without ever knowing them.

Ivan moved along beside me, keeping Macharius in sight. All of his attention was focused on the Lord High Commander. He was ready to throw himself forward and take a bullet for the man if needed. Even with all my doubts, I was prepared to do the same. It takes a lot to alter the habits of a lifetime.

We had almost reached the first enemy gun. A column of troops moved past it on the far side, still heading for the battlefield. Macharius's mouth moved and I could see he was still talking into the comm-net, giving orders, keeping commanders' morale up, doing whatever needed to be done. I prayed to the Emperor that the comm-grid remained functional enough for those on the receiving end of his commands to follow instructions.

Maybe they were. A sudden hail of detonations exploded around the near ridgeline, sending the enemy ducking for cover. Macharius gave the signal for Ivan and me to move forward to the nearest gun. I hooked the shotgun over my shoulder and drew a knife. I was going to try to do this without drawing attention to myself. To my surprise four of Drake's bodyguards moved with us, blackened wires held in their outstretched hands. Garrottes, I realised.

We scooted forward, holding ourselves low, keeping the bulk of the gun between the enemy column and ourselves. The gunners on the back of the chassis loaded as an officer gave them instructions. They were brave men or uncaring. They somehow managed to ignore the hail of fire raining down near their position as if confident that it would not touch them.

They had faith in their own way, I supposed, and it was, in a strange fashion, justified. They were not going to be hit, save by accident, because

Macharius had ordered it so. Of course that did not mean a stray shot could not hit them. I had been on enough battlefields to know that nothing ever goes completely according to plan.

Not waiting to take any more chances I raced forward to the side of the vehicle. It was in firing position, with great armoured legs extruded from its sides to hold it in position despite any recoil. I ran into its shadow, alongside the tracks. I pressed my back against them and waited for Ivan and the others to catch up with me.

There was something at once reassuring and unsettling being so close to the great armoured fighting vehicle. Reassuring because of the metallic smell and the strange incense of the engine emissions, because the vibration of the internal power systems reminded me of other vehicles I had ridden in. Unsettling because there was a strangeness to the scent, an odour of rot and corruption, the like of which I had never quite smelt before. It was as if the metal of the gun itself held some sort of disease. I wondered if that was even possible.

I grabbed my bayonet in my teeth, reached up and caught the top of the track, below the armoured mudguards. I pulled myself up, feet resting on the bolts holding the great drive wheels that powered the tracks when the vehicle was in motion, and I swarmed over the side. Just ahead of me was an officer. I stepped forward, threw an arm over his throat, pulled his head back and stabbed with my knife.

A moment later Ivan and the others were over the sides. Ivan dived on the nearest crewman and the storm troopers leapt forward like shadows, looping their garrottes around the necks of their targets. The officer died beneath my hand, kicking out in frantic agony, his bowels voiding, urine and blood soaking the legs of his tunic. I let him fall and I moved over to the open hatch on top of the gun. I dropped in through it, into the dimly lit interior of the modified Hydra.

In a way it was like coming home. Ever since basic training I have felt comfortable within the hull of an armoured fighting vehicle. I like having metal walls around me, shutting me out from all of the dangers of a battlefield, or at least minimising them.

I had never driven anything quite like this modified Hydra. The fact that it had been manufactured by heretics made it even less familiar. Nonetheless

most vehicles of human construction share some common design elements – the ancient templates from which they are worked make it so. Almost invariably the drivers' sections are at the front of the vehicle so that they can get a clear view of where they are going.

I moved forward in a fighting crouch, knife at the ready. The body of the tank cut off much of the sound of battle. It seemed almost quiet after the hellish clamour outside. I could hear the voices of the heretics up front as they talked to each other in their wheezy, guttural tongue. I heard one man cough, and it was as if a great mass of phlegm moved around within his chest as he did so.

I had no idea what they were saying and no desire to find out. Even as that thought crossed my mind, one of them started to gabble at the other. Perhaps his companion had insulted him or perhaps he was excited by the carnage all around him. It seemed much more likely to me that he had just found out something was going on around him, as if he had received a message about the attack on the gun above.

I stuck my head around the corner and saw what I expected. Two men sat together in the traditional drivers' bucket seats. Before them was a command altar with the standard controls one would expect on a vehicle like this. The one who I assumed to be the driver looked up as I came in and reached for his sidearm. I stepped back, angled the shotgun around the corner, pulled the trigger and stepped away.

The roar of the gun was deafeningly loud within the close confines of the tank's interior. Even so I could hear the screams. The pellets of the shotgun blast ricocheted within the cockpit like thousands of small angry metal wasps, bouncing off the metal surfaces until they came to rest in something soft and massive enough to stop them or until they lost all momentum.

I had chosen to fire at an angle that reduced the chances of the pellets flying back to hit me. Even so some of them did. It was difficult to imagine the convoluted course they must have followed, but if you fire enough of something, dumb luck dictates you have a chance of hitting anything, including yourself, even when you are standing around a corner. I took a pellet in my hand. It drew blood. Another gashed my cheek. Another tore a strip from my leg. None of the wounds were serious. I waited for a second and risked a glance around the corner again.

I put my head lower this time so that if the driver was aiming for where I

had been it would take him a fraction of a second to alter his aim. I need not have bothered. The two heretics were a mess. One of them had lost an eye and his face was covered in blood. So was his neck, as the flesh had been torn and an artery had been hit. Blood pumped between the fingers he was using to try to hold the wound closed. It was not going to do him much good – he would bleed out in a minute at most.

His companion looked worse. He was clutching his stomach. It had been perforated in a hundred places. He too was splattered in blood, his own and his companion's. He had absorbed most of the blast. His sidearm lay on the cockpit floor. His mouth was open and blood ran from it. The shots had smashed his teeth in a score of places. One of them had buried itself in a molar and glittered at me.

I was not going to risk another blast at close range in this tightly enclosed space. The cockpit was too small to risk it. Instead I stepped forward and slammed the butt of the shotgun into the driver's face. Bones snapped, and so did his neck. He had been strapped into his chair and braced and the force of my strike pushed his head back at an unnatural angle.

His companion said something in a terrified, pain-filled voice. I felt something like guilt and that made me hit him all the harder, smashing his skull until it was little more than jelly.

When I was sure they were both dead, I pulled the driver from his chair. There was no time to wipe it clean of blood or other stuff. It squelched as I sat down. The place smelt like the inside of an abattoir but all the time there was that strange, sickly sweet, mould-like smell I had come to associate with the battlefields of Loki.

I wiped the blood off the driver's periscope with the sleeve of my tunic. The seat of my trousers felt wet and I knew it was because of the blood there. My boots squelched when I moved my feet on the control pedals. I made a few invocations experimentally as my hands danced over the controls. The Hydra still followed the patterns of the old rituals and the vehicle roared to life beneath my hands. I glanced into the periscope and studied the battlefield.

The enemy troops flowed past us, heading down into the battlefield. They had not yet realised that the tank was under enemy control. Hopefully they would not for a few seconds yet. A shudder on the ceiling above me told me that the turret had started to traverse. I had no idea what it was aiming for.

All I could hope was that Ivan had managed to take over the controls. He had always been a better than competent gunner.

The thought struck me that even if Ivan was not in charge of the guns there was still something I could do, even if it cost me my life. I hit the controls, heard the engines roar to life and got the great vehicle into gear.

I won't say that driving the heretic Hydra was exactly like driving an Imperial vehicle but it was close enough. The basic principles of guiding a tank or anything else with tracks remain the same no matter what it is you are in. If you put forward power on both treads you go forwards. If you put both treads into reverse, you go backwards. If you put one tread into forward gear and the other into reverse you rotate. That's what I did now. When I heard a grinding sound from the sides of the tank I realised I had forgotten to retract the stabilisers.

Gibbering, wheezing noises came from the comm-net. There was an angry, interrogative sound to them. Given their volume and the fact they were coming from the ear bead of the nearest corpse I could only assume that someone was asking me what I was doing. I kept my attention focused on the periscope even as I fumbled for the controls that would retract the stabilisers. I did not want anything to slow us down once we started to move.

Pistons hissed and there was a clanging sound from the sides and rear of the tank as the stabilisers retracted. I had guessed correctly. In the periscope I saw the faces of a few heretic soldiers turn to look at me. Most of them kept marching with the strange, drugged discipline that had been so common in the trenches.

I fed full power into both tracks and the tank raced forward, almost leaping from the pit in which it had been hull down. I prayed to the Emperor that one of the Leman Russ down there did not choose this exact moment to aim an accurate shot at us. My heart was in my mouth until the Hydra was on the other side of the slope heading right down into the marching army emerging from the hive side.

I saw eyes open wide in panic and men turn to scramble away as they realised what was happening. Only a few had and as they turned they barged into their annoyed companions and were tripped and fouled, their flight impeded by all the marching men around them. By then I had the tank

in their line. It bumped and juddered. Faint gurgling screams came from outside.

I had seen enough men run over by tanks to be able to picture the results of my driving in my mind's eye. I was leaving bloody smears and jellied bones on the rocky surface of the hive.

An officer held up his hand palm outward in the universal gesture that means stop. Perhaps he thought that the Hydra's driver had just made a mistake, taken a wrong turn, and needed someone to tell him what to do. I ran him over along with the company behind him that was already turning and starting to flee.

The chaos increased as they ran into the men behind them who had not yet realised what was happening. I fed the engines more power, trying to move as far and fast as possible and kill as many of the heretics as I could before order was restored, but they realised what was happening and someone set up an anti-tank weapon.

The tank left a trail of mangled flesh in its wake. The gun above me barked, sending a high-powered shell smashing into the top of the gateway through which the enemy marched. The rockcrete above the entrance cracked. A huge piece of statuary dropped, crushing the men below it, partially blocking the way through, disrupting the smooth flow of enemy soldiers emerging to do battle. It looked like Ivan had taken control of the Hydra's primary armament.

The gun fired again and once more the shot smashed into the arch of the gateway. To any outside observer it looked as if the gun was being fired wildly but I knew better. At least I hoped I did. The third shot convinced me that the gunner knew his business. The arch finally cracked and sent tens of tons of stonework dropping onto the soldiers below, sealing the exit from the hive until heavy equipment could be brought up to clear it. At least the murderous army below us on the slope would be getting no reinforcements. That only left the thousands of them already on the surface to deal with.

I threw the Hydra into reverse and increased the speed as I brought it round in a great arc, feeding slightly more power to the left track than the right. It was a simple evasive manoeuvre, intended to make it more difficult for anyone to draw a bead on us. I realised that less than a minute had passed and that the enemy were still struggling to understand what was going on. That would not last – even if they were still assuming it was

incompetence or madness that was responsible for our actions, there was going to be a response soon. In the meantime…

I sent the Hydra forward again, crushing more heretics. The gun above me spoke in a voice of thunder. One of the enemy guns along the ridgeline went up in a pillar of fire and smoke.

‘Well done, Lemuel,’ Macharius’s voice said over the comm-net ear bead. ‘You somewhat exceeded your orders, but good thinking.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ I said.

‘Keep them busy for another two minutes and thirty seconds. Help is on its way.’

I wondered what he meant by that. It did not seem possible that the Leman Russ had made so much progress against the enemy below us. I knew the tanks could not cover so much ground in so short a time. Perhaps he was only talking to keep morale up but that was not like Macharius. Perhaps he knew something that we did not.

I heard another gun opening up from behind us and saw another of the enemy weapons go up. It looked like Macharius’s other bodyguards had captured a second mobile gun.

Of course, now that meant there were two of us facing off against the enemy. I hoped doubling our firepower was not the full extent of Macharius’s plan.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I crushed more of the heretics. The gun destroyed more enemy vehicles and, at last, they started to respond. Men lobbed grenades at us. The Hydra shook with the impact. Some of the grenades were fragmentation and their shrapnel pattered on the sides like rain. I worried about the gunners exposed in the turrets but there was nothing I could do for them, except try to keep us moving and thus make us a harder target. I offered up a prayer to the Emperor that Ivan was safe and I brought the vehicle round hard. I was trying to keep the forward armour, always the strongest part of a tank, towards the enemy as much as possible.

Something hurtled into us from the side. I caught a flash from the corner of my eye. There was a detonation and the whole vehicle shook. For a moment I wondered if I was dead. Sparks flickered from the Hydra's systems, but the engine kept roaring as the power-core fed it energy. Then I heard a strange slithering, scraping, knocking sound like someone drawing steel against steel with a great deal of power. There was a metallic screaming noise. The vehicle juddered as if it were rolling over very bumpy ground on one side. The weirdest thing was that the other side was stable and the area around us was quite flat. The Hydra began to circle. The left control stick fought against my grip as if the spirit of the machine itself had decided to disobey me.

Then I realised what had happened. We had taken a hit to the left-side track. Tracks are the weak point of any armoured fighting vehicle. Judging

by the sound of it, the treads had broken and were in the process of becoming unwrapped from the mechanism.

I cursed. The tank could still move, for the moment, unless the mechanism became completely fouled, but the left-hand drives would gain far less traction. That was what was sending us circling. I cut power to the right tread and we began moving straight again but at a fraction of our normal speed.

Another shot slammed into us. It was as if we had taken a punch from a giant's armoured fist. There was the sound of an explosion, the smell of smoke and burning. I heard something clattering metal on metal deep within the hull. I tasted ozone on my tongue and all the lights on the command altar flickered and died. The right stick stopped responding as well. The pedals were simply sprung-steel mechanisms beneath my feet. Nothing happened when I pushed them.

I wasted no time on invocations to try and resurrect the spirit of the dead war machine. It was gone and it was beyond my power to bring it back. Worse than that, the Hydra had ceased to move. It was a sitting duck for whatever weapon had already reduced it to a powerless hulk. If I remained within it I was most likely going to die there.

It was dark within the cockpit now, save for the brief flickers of sparks from the shorting-out systems and the lightning flash illumination of the battlefield being filtered in through the periscope. There was barely enough light to see by. I unstrapped myself and rose from the chair. My boot plunged into something soft and sticky which sucked and resisted when I tried to lift it. I felt soft snakes entangle my leg along with a sopping wetness and I realised I had put my foot into the remains of the dead driver. I pulled it free, filled with an urgent desire to get out of the doomed vehicle before I joined him in death.

I banged my head as I stood up in the unfamiliar smallness of the cockpit and I stretched out my hands to touch the sticky bloodstained walls and guide myself through the gloom.

My heartbeat thundered in my ears and my breathing came in short gasps. Every moment I expected another shot to smash into the tank. As I moved down the corridor I could see a hole had been blown in the Hydra's side. It was not big enough to scramble through or I would have done so. I made my way through the gloom towards the hatch. The opening had been

deformed by the impact of whatever had damaged the tank and the ladder had been bent out of all shape.

I reached up and pulled myself through. My tunic snagged on a protruding edge and held me in place. I glanced around and saw that an enemy gun had been brought to bear on us. The loaders were working frantically and it was set at the perfect angle to hit us. It would not take them more than a few seconds to complete their actions and I was doomed to a fiery death when they did so. The shell would flash across the distance that separated us in a heartbeat. I squirmed and tried to get myself free. Nothing happened for a moment and then I heard fabric tear. The enemy gunner reached for a lever. I knew he was about to fire and that my life was over.

At that moment, brilliant trails of light split the sky overhead. I saw the gunner look up for a second, confused by what was happening. I took advantage of the moment to leap clear of the doomed Hydra. I noticed that Ivan and the others had already done the same. I hit the hard ground with a grunt and rolled, looking for cover. As I did so, I saw the comet trails of light sweep down towards the battlefield, each attached to a glowing dot.

In the first second I cursed. Was this some sort of orbital bombardment? Was I doomed to die under the guns of the Imperial fleet? Or was this a of meteor cloud, fallout from the moonfall?

I wondered if it could be an aircraft, but none I could think of moved that fast. In the few seconds since I had noticed them, they had come noticeably closer, flashing down with the speed of falling comets. They seemed to be aimed at the ground.

I found a fold of rock and threw myself behind it. For a few seconds my thoughts were distracted by the explosion of the gun I had abandoned. Obviously the heretic gunner had remembered to fire. His shot turned the Hydra into a pile of burning wreckage. A smell of burning machine oil and roasting flesh filled the air and it struck me that if I had been but a little slower I would have been charred meat within its metal remains.

My heart pounded within my chest. There was a taste of bile in my mouth and my eyes were dazzled. When they cleared again the comet trails had descended further. I saw glittering lights at their tip and I was struck by their familiarity. They seemed to be slowing now, although their velocity was still fantastic. They must be missiles of some kind, aimed at the

ground.

I fumbled for my shotgun and glanced around. I was surrounded by heretic soldiers, all of whom were looking up now. I could have taken a clear shot at the nearest but that would just have drawn their attention to me so I scuttled from rock to rock, crab-wise, seeking my way back to Macharius and the Lion Guard.

The flashing comet trails arced towards the battle and I saw for the first time they were aircraft decelerating at an insane speed that would leave anyone within them crippled by the force of gravity exerted on them. Fires flickered around them and the guns near me began to explode. It took me a second to realise that they were being destroyed by the newcomers. It took me another second to recall where I had seen those blessed vessels before.

They were Thunderhawk gunships and they were coming in to land. As they did so there was an enormous earth-shaking noise as the sonic boom they had been outracing caught up with them.

The Space Wolves had arrived riding on the thunder.

The heavy bolters on the Thunderhawks blazed, sparking along the armoured sides of the modified Hydras, cutting through the bodies of men as if they were simply not there. One of them hovered in the air giving covering fire while the others landed, or rather hovered just above the ground. Hatches in their side opened, disgorging massive armoured figures. They leapt to the ground, legs flexing on impact, bolters blazing, not in the least discomposed by the deceleration of a landing that would have left an ordinary man crippled.

I rolled into cover, not wanting to be taken for a heretic and killed by accident. I needn’t have bothered. One of the warriors noticed me. His head twisted to one side, attracted by the movement. His nostrils flared and he looked away, dismissing me as a threat. I might have been insulted if I had not been so relieved.

The Space Wolves numbered fewer than a hundred but that did not stop them. They bounded across the battlefield, moving into the heavy clumps of surprised heretics, turning them at once into prey and cover. Howling battle cries rose over the chaos of the battlefield. Blood fountained and chainswords flickered. In the distance I saw the captured Basilisk lurch forward, gun blasting, picking off its fellow heretics. Somehow the Space

Wolves knew to leave it alone, that it was on their side.

They cut through the heretics like a chainsword through bone, smashing into them, leaving piles of corpses in their wake. They were a whirlwind of violence passing over the field.

I kept crawling, hoping to find a position from which I could contribute something to the battle. I found myself staring at a pair of ceramite-encased legs and looked up to see the face of Logan Grimnar looking down at me.

'We meet again, Sergeant Lemuel,' he said. His voice was a fierce growl but I thought I detected a glint of humour in his eyes. I pulled myself upright, using his massive armoured form as cover. I am not a small man but compared to him I felt like a child. He turned for a moment, snapped off a shot and said, 'It has been a while since we fought alongside each other. It pleases me to do so again.'

'Not as much as it pleases me to see you here,' I said, and I meant it. The Space Wolves might only have doubled our number of troops on the ground but they were turning the battle. They had arrived at precisely the right moment to take advantage of the chaos. I noticed that squads of them had already captured the modified Hydra and were holding them against the oncoming tide of heretics. They were firing the weapons down into the battle in the valley below and I guessed they were not shooting at the Leman Russ.

I could hear the roar of approaching armour now. It mingled with the sounds of shooting, the cacophony of battle and the howl of Thunderhawk engines overhead. Glancing around I saw that Macharius and the others had abandoned their captured gun and were making for higher ground. I understood why at once. They did not want to be mistaken for an enemy when the Leman Russ arrived. The Space Wolves kept fighting and shooting, pulling their captured tanks back from the ridge and out of the line of fire. Clearly they were not going to abandon their prizes until absolutely the last second.

'I must get to Macharius, sir,' I said. 'I am his bodyguard.'

'That is well, for I must speak to him. Let us go together.'

And so once more I found myself racing across the battlefield in the company of a warrior who was already legendary.

A detachment of Space Wolves fell into place around us. I would have said

they were Grimnar's bodyguards but clearly he did not need any. He was quite capable of looking after himself. I have felt more threatened crossing the streets of a hive than I did running through that inferno of battle with the Space Wolves.

They wore armour so heavy a mortal man could not lift it and I wore only my normal uniform but still I struggled to keep up with them. They moved with long, easy loping strides that ate the ground beneath them. Nothing that got in their way lived. They laughed and growled as they shot and hacked.

I caught a hint of movement from the corner of my eye. I began to turn, raising my shotgun. By the time I had done so, a Space Wolf had lifted his bolter and removed the threat with a single shot. It happened again and again as we moved. I was never quick enough. There was never a threat I perceived before they did. They were superhumanly aware of all that went on around them, raking the battlefield with senses that mortals simply did not possess. At least that was the way it seemed to me.

As we raced over a hump in the hive side, Grimnar turned, bringing his bolter to bear. The other Wolves did the same. A moment later we saw a group of heretics moving cautiously into view. The Wolves could not have seen them, could not have heard them over the roar of the battle and yet they knew the enemy were there. I struggled to work out how. Had they smelt them? It did not seem likely, but what other explanation was there?

More to the point, they opened fire at once. They shot with control and precision. There was none of the confusion you would have got in such a situation with a normal group of even veteran *human* soldiers. Every Wolf picked a different target and shot him, and then did it again and again. There was no hesitation, no moment when they did not seem to know exactly what they were doing. And they reacted as one, like the pack of feral hunters that they were. They shared an understanding that went beyond the merely human and made them seem almost like one large organism. I had seen Macharius forge units of men into well-honed machines but the Space Wolves seemed to operate that way on instinct, but I know not how.

We came at last to the position that Macharius and the Lion Guard held. I saw Anton watching us, eyes wide as we approached. He was standing guard on the lip of a crater, covering the battlefield with his sniper rifle,

occasionally taking a shot when a clear target presented itself. He made the sign of the aquila over his chest when he saw the Space Wolves arrive. There was something odd about the movement. It was jerky. His tunic seemed much darker as well. He waved at me cheerfully.

A moment later we were bounding down into the position, where Macharius waited with Drake and the remnants of his bodyguard. They stood amid a ring of wounded and dying soldiers. Clearly it had not just been the heretics who had taken casualties. Macharius finished saying something into the comm-net and then looked up and gave a smile of greeting to Grimnar.

‘As always you have chosen a good time to make an appearance, Logan Grimnar,’ he said.

‘I came looking for a battle, but this was only a skirmish,’ said the Space Wolf. His voice boomed out. His words should have sounded bombastic but there was a confidence and a humour in them that made me smile.

‘You will have your battle yet,’ said Macharius. ‘We are only knocking at the enemy’s door. He has yet to let us in.’

‘I am glad to hear that. We have come a long way for things to end so swiftly.’ He sounded as though he meant it, as if he would be disappointed that a fight in which he was outnumbered a mere twenty-five to one by heretics was a let-down. I wondered what it must be like to feel so certain of victory. It was certainly inspiring in an odd sort of way to be confronted with such confidence.

‘Well, if you have nothing better to do, you could perhaps secure the entrance for us,’ Macharius said.

With Grimnar to think was to act. ‘That we can do.’

No other words were spoken so he turned with his honour guard and raced away, heading back out onto the battlefield.

‘Lemuel,’ said Macharius. ‘I find it reassuring to see that your luck or the Emperor’s favour has not deserted you.’

‘The Space Wolves brought me back, sir,’ I said. ‘It was their doing, not mine.’

‘Yes, but they found you, Lemuel,’ Macharius said. ‘In all the chaos of battle, you ran into Logan Grimnar. And not for the first time.’

He turned to say something into the comm-net and his attention slid away from me. Even as he did so, he nodded his head to me. I was clearly

dismissed. I looked around the vast shell-hole in which we were encamped. There was no sign of Ivan.

I walked over to the perimeter and took up a position beside Anton. ‘You seen Ivan?’ I asked. He leaned forward and studied the battlefield through his sniper-scope.

‘Last I saw of him he was with you, on the thing that looked like a Hydra,’ Anton said. His voice sounded odd. He squeezed the trigger. Somewhere below us a small figure fell. The barrel of the rifle tracked a little to the right. Anton sought another target.

I looked down and saw that his tunic was soaked in blood. I took a closer look at him and noticed he was pale and his face was twisted. ‘What in hell has happened to you?’ I said. ‘Sit down.’

‘No need,’ he said. ‘I am a goner.’ He removed his mask and I could see there was blood trickling from his nostrils and mouth.

‘So you are a medicae now?’

He laughed until it became a horrible choking sound. ‘Take a look for yourself, if you don’t believe me.’

I pushed him down and opened the tunic. A huge sliver of shrapnel had sunk deep into his belly. It must have been agonising but he did not give much sign of it. ‘Standard,’ he said. ‘I come all this way and I get taken out by my own side. It was those frakkers in the Russ down below. Overshot their target, shell exploded here. Can’t feel my legs now.’

‘Don’t talk,’ I said. ‘We’ll get you down to Drake, maybe he can do something.’

‘Don’t bother. It’s getting dark and I feel a bit dizzy.’ He stopped for a moment. ‘At least I got to see the Space Wolves fight again,’ he said. ‘How many hivers from Belial can say that?’ He sounded proud and pleased and his eyes were wide open.

‘Shut up and I’ll get you down to Drake,’ I said but I knew it was too late. His skin was cold and his breathing had stopped and I knew that the idiot boy had contradicted me for the last time. I piled some rocks up over him and stuck his sniper rifle in the cairn to mark the spot.

It took me some time and then I made my way back to Macharius and waited for instructions. There did not seem to be much else to do.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

With a mighty rumble of engines the first of the Leman Russ roared over the ridge and slammed down into the enemy position. It was at that moment they were most vulnerable, when their underbellies were temporarily exposed by the climb. That's when the enemy should have hit them with every anti-tank weapon they had. But the time for that had passed. The Space Wolves had descended from the assault guns they had captured and were ripping through the enemy lines. Macharius's small force kept up what fire they could in support while the Thunderhawks swooped overhead like great birds of prey, turning their guns on the enemy positions from above, slaughtering ground targets by the score, constantly in motion to stop them from becoming easy targets.

Once our armour arrived the battle was over. The terrified and distracted enemy infantry had their hands full trying to cope with the constant strike and withdrawal of the Space Wolves. They did not think to defend themselves against this new enemy until it was too late.

By then, the Space Wolves all seemed to have somehow moved out of the killing ground. They were fighting their way towards the entrance that Ivan had partially sealed earlier, moving forward squad by squad, giving each other supporting fire, striking with a precision and assurance no mortal soldier could match.

Macharius moved into position nearby and surveyed the battlefield through his magnoculars, picking out points of weakness, giving directions

to the tank commanders, acting as a spotter even as he read the tactical situation. He stood tall and confident and radiated power and assurance. It was as if he fed from being on the battlefield, a god of war drinking mead distilled from blood and terror. In some ways he reminded me of the Space Wolves, with his more than human ferocity and energy.

‘It is done,’ he said. And at that moment, as if he had commanded it, there was silence. I looked down on the field and saw that he was right. Every heretic was dead or had fled. We were in command of the entrance to the hive. He had achieved his victory.

We walked up to the hive entrance. The Space Wolves had settled into easy possession of it, standing or sitting in small groups amid the rubble and the corpses. They seemed as much at their ease as they ever were.

‘Well met,’ said Macharius. Grimnar rose from among his companions. He walked over to Macharius and loomed over him. He was one of the few men I had ever seen who could make the Lord High Commander seem small.

‘Perhaps not,’ Grimnar said.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Macharius.

‘I do not like the way this place smells.’ I doubt anyone else would have dared to say something like that to Macharius but Grimnar not only did so, but he also made it sound serious. And, truth be told, we all took him seriously. His instincts had been proven correct too many times in the past.

‘What don’t you like?’ Macharius asked.

‘There is the stink of old Darkness here, of ancient enemies, of the foes of the Allfather.’ Something told me that by that he did not simply mean heretics. He pointed to the fast-decomposing corpses of our former enemies. I remembered all too clearly the way such bodies had come back to a hideous unlife. Perhaps I should have wondered why it had not happened here yet. ‘These ones have been twisted,’ the Space Wolf said. ‘There is something unclean about them.’

He gestured at the hive with one huge armoured hand. ‘There is something unclean about this whole place.’

Macharius turned to Drake. ‘We must find Richter,’ he said, ‘he must face the Emperor’s justice.’

I felt sure Macharius was more concerned with the traitor escaping his

justice than the Emperor's, but it did not seem my place to say it.

Drake nodded. 'We must go below,' he said.

'It will take some time to clear the way,' Macharius replied. He turned to us and said, 'Get some rest.'

'We have only just arrived,' said Grimnar. He looked up at the turrets higher on the hillside. They had continued to fire down into the killing zones. 'I think, though, I can find something for my men to do while you recuperate from your labours.'

He turned on his heel and marched away, bellowing orders to his fellow warriors. I stood there, feeling numb. For the moment the fighting was over and I had some time to think.

It was cold. Ice had formed in the shadows of the rubble. Snowflakes were crystallising in the air. A vast cloud still hovered overhead and the dim greenish lights of the hive flickered on emergency power. A drumbeat of thought sounded in my mind. I had not seen Ivan since I drove the Hydra through the heretics. No one else seemed to have seen him either. It looked like he was another casualty.

I refused to accept it. The three of us had not gone thirty years in the Imperial Guard together just so I could lose them both in one day – it just did not seem possible. The pair of them had always been indestructible, emerging from every deranged adventure with a collection of scars and stories. I told myself to be realistic, that I had seen enough death to know that it came to everyone and often at random. Stalk around battlefields long enough and your number will come up. You'll find yourself in someone's sights.

I needed to find out what had happened to Ivan. I could not rest till I had done so. I got up and tried to retrace my path away from the brewed-up enemy gun where I had last seen him. It was not going to be easy.

I felt pressure build up on the back of my legs from the strain of moving downslope. Somewhere above us a turret fell silent and the sound of shelling dropped off a fraction.

I came to the burned-out remains of the Hydra chassis. It was just a pile of scrap metal now, twisted and fused and blackened by the passing of war. Bodies lay all around it. Most of them were in the state of advanced decomposition I associated with the heretics. One or two of them were the

torn remains of more normal mortals.

I walked over and inspected the nearest. It wore the grey of one of Drake's storm troopers. Its mirrored visor was cracked and broken with droplets of blackened blood congealed on it. Within I saw the face of the storm trooper, for the first time ever. It looked normal and peaceful in death but it did not look like anybody I knew. I thought about burial, of saying the funeral rites, but I was just too weary.

I tried to recreate the path along which I had driven. You'd think it would be easy, what with tanks leaving tracks behind them and all, but there were bodies and signs of blasting everywhere. And that realisation did make it easier for I could trace from the blast circles every impact point at which the tank had been hit.

I studied the corpses of the fallen and noticed something familiar lying downslope and off to the left. I had found Ivan's body.

My heart sank when I saw the shattered remains of the broken bionic that lay close to the fallen figure. Ivan lay face down, his back bloody, coils of wire and metal emerging from his shoulder. Heart in my mouth I walked over to where he lay.

He was pretty badly beaten up. His back was riddled with shrapnel. His legs were wounded. His arm had been removed by the blast. I turned him over, worried by what I would see. Maybe his front was worse than his back. Maybe he was going to spill his guts all over the ground.

He didn't, but his eyes were closed. I checked his heartbeat and was relieved to find there was still a pulse. At that moment his eyes flickered open.

'What the hell happened to you?' I asked.

He looked up at me and said, 'Damned if I know.'

His jaw was twisted out of shape and his words mangled even more than usual.

'I was running away from the anti-tank gun. There was an explosion and I felt a pain through my shoulder.' He looked down at the metallic stump where his bionic arm had been.

'Can you walk?' I said. I tried to lift him to his feet. He stretched himself and rose shakily then walked over to where what was left of his arm lay. It did not look as if it were going to be repaired any time soon and we were a

long way from getting any spare parts.

‘How did it go? We win?’ Ivan asked. ‘The last thing I remembered was seeing some lights in the sky. I thought it was the explosion.’

‘Space Wolves,’ I said. ‘Grimnar pulled our nads out of the fire again.’

‘That was good of him.’

‘I think he feels he owes Macharius for what happened on Demetrius.’

Ivan nodded and then took another experimental step or two. ‘It’s lucky he felt that way then. I was pretty sure we were all doomed. Where’s the idiot?’

I wanted to tell him but I could not. The words just seemed to get stuck in my throat. I tried to force them out again and still nothing came, only a strange gasping noise that I could not even make sound like words.

‘Damn,’ Ivan said, his words mangled. ‘Damn. Damn. Damn.’

We limped up the slope again towards where the rest of the Lion Guard were encamped. ‘How did it happen?’ Ivan asked eventually.

‘Shrapnel in the gut,’ I said. I paused for what felt like an hour and added, ‘Our own side.’

He looked away and shook his head. ‘Typical,’ was all he said.

I lay on the side of a vast daemon. It was as big as a hive but its flanks were green and slimy. Warts the size of turrets emerged from its side, burst blisters made huge gates in its skin. When I looked up I saw a great grinning face looking down at me. It was the same daemon I had seen when I lay in the hospital back on Niflgard. It smiled, revealing huge glistening yellow teeth, but there was no humour in its eyes. They were empty abysses cold as the darkness between the stars. There was a vacuum in them that threatened to suck my soul right out of my body.

I knew I had to look away or I was doomed, so I forced myself to look down. For a second I was looking at the daemon’s skin but that faded into translucence and I was looking at its internal organs, veins the size of streets, intestines big enough to hold a city. Corpses lay everywhere. They looked as if they had died all at once. Those street-veins were filled with them. They had that strange decomposed look I associated with the walking dead. I wondered what had happened to them.

It took me a moment to realise: life support failure, the nightmare of every hive dweller. The moonfall must have taken out the power and the

circulation of air and all the cleansing systems must have failed. With the strange logic of dreams I was no longer looking at a daemon's innards but a dead hive city and I always had been.

It was not entirely dead though, for within it, like maggots wriggling through a corpse, things still moved. Some were monstrous, partially human, but too big and too large, with white skin that somehow reminded me of slugs. There were other monsters born of men who had fed on the diseased corpses and been twisted by it.

They could not be real, I told myself. I must be dreaming. And it came to me that I had experienced such dreams before in other places like this and they had always contained within them seeds of truth. I felt breathing become difficult as one of those walking corpses turned his glowing eyes to look at me and stretched out one gauntleted hand. I knew without being told that if he completed that gesture he would become fully aware of me and I would die. I turned to flee…

I came to wakefulness around the gate of Richter's citadel. I could see Drake nearby and Macharius and Grimnar. A halo of light played around the inquisitor's head and I guessed he must have been working some strange sorcery of his. Perhaps the backlash of it had touched my dreams and those of the other Guardsmen around me.

Drake's whole posture spoke of weariness, as if he had been overstraining his gifts. He looked like a man who had just run for a day carrying a full pack. 'Richter is down there,' he said, 'and so are other things. If we go down there, death is waiting for us all.'

'It awaits every man around every corner,' said Macharius.

'That is well said,' Grimnar agreed.

'You are resolved then?' said Drake.

'Aye,' said Macharius.

'Very well then,' the inquisitor said. 'We should make ready to depart.'

'I want to get my hands on the traitor and put an end to this once and for all,' Macharius said. I picked myself up and looked around. Ivan lay nearby. He was awake and studying his surroundings. He had the veteran's gift for being able to sleep anywhere and at a moment's notice and wake in an instant. I walked over to him and drew my boot back.

'Cold here,' he said. He was looking in the direction of Anton's burial mound. I had shown him where it was.

‘Then we’d best get you into the warm, little man,’ said Grimnar.

I heard men discussing the arrival of the Space Wolves and how victory was certain with the Emperor’s Angels beside us. There was a confidence in the air now, as if the presence of the Space Marines were a sign of the Emperor looking with renewed favour upon Macharius. Knowing the circumstances in which their aid had been granted I was a bit less confident but I said nothing. On a battlefield, morale is everything, and the presence of Grimnar and his band was good for our morale.

I heard the roar of Leman Russ engines and the grinding of great blocks of rockcrete being dragged away from the entrance of the hive. It seemed as if the gloom of this world had really infected me, for I did not share the soldiers’ confidence in our ultimate victory. I had the feeling that none of us were going to come out of this alive.

The Space Wolves had already scouted ahead before we even entered the hive. They moved in advance of us now as we roared into the depths.

I rode along within the Leman Russ Macharius had chosen to be his new command vehicle, and eyed the streets warily. Dead bodies were everywhere and I half expected them to come springing to life around us.

In some ways Richter’s citadel was like any other hive, smaller than most perhaps but otherwise the same. It was a complete city with its own life support systems, built level upon level, rising hundreds of metres into the air, sinking thousands of metres into the planet’s crust.

The effects of the moon-strike were evident, though. The city was cold and dead inside. Corpses filled the area massively: life support systems had failed and air purifiers had ceased to function. In whole sectors people had choked to death on poisonous fumes. Obviously someone somewhere had been working on bringing the systems back on stream but it had come too late for the people who had died here.

Drake sat with Macharius in the command cockpit. ‘There is an odd psychic pulse here,’ he said. ‘I don’t like this at all.’

‘You think this is another trap?’ Macharius asked.

‘I know it is.’

‘Good,’ Macharius said. ‘Then we are in agreement.’

I thought again about the dead bodies and the lack of walking dead and I realised that the most likely reason they had not risen and attacked us yet

was because it was not time for them to do so.

'There's something else here,' Drake said. 'The feeling of something tainted and evil. I sense the presence of Nurgle's daemons.'

'Grimnar said something similar,' Macharius said. 'He caught the scent of an ancient enemy, whatever he means by that. He looked happy about it, though.'

'He would. He lives to die in battle,' Drake said. 'I can think of few things the Space Wolves count as ancient enemies that I would like to meet.'

'If it is our fate to do so, it is our fate,' said Macharius. He sounded at once mocking and resigned. There was weariness in his voice and in his manner. 'All I ask is to settle my score with those who have betrayed me.'

I wondered if it was worth the lives of all the men who were going to die for that to be accomplished. I pushed the thought out of my mind. After all I was only there to drive the Leman Russ and put myself in the way of any bullets aimed at Macharius. I wondered at the fact that I had become so cynical. Had I been infected with something more than illness when I came here? Anton's death had hit me hard and made me all too aware of my mortality.

Ivan had been silent since we mounted the Leman Russ. We were not a cheerful crew as we pushed on deeper into the hive of the dead.

There were more and more corpses as we made our way down. They looked as if they had fallen to some disease. We drove for hours and everywhere we found death.

No one engaged us. No one attacked us. The hive lights were dim and flickered as if still on emergency power. The air had a greenish tinge to it that was in no way natural.

I don't know what Macharius had been expecting but I doubt that it had been this. I could sense the tension when Grimnar's signal came in. It seemed some of his Wolves had taken prisoners.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

We found them holed up in a hab-block,' Grimnar said, indicating the huddled group of pale-faced humans cowering in the shadow of the Space Marines. 'They're the only ones we've found alive so far. They must know something.'

Drake nodded. His security people had already scanned them to make sure they had no sub-dermal explosives and were not assassins. Looking at them I would have said they were typical hive workers or what passed for such on this world. They were about medium-sized for humans, pale-skinned, blond, with pinkish-tinted eyes and a look that reminded me of albino rats.

'Very good,' said Drake. 'Let us find out what they know.'

He strode up to the nearest, making no attempt to reassure them. A nimbus of light played around his head. When he reached out, a second halo of light jumped around the local's head. The man's face contorted, the tendons on his neck stood out, sweat appeared on his brow. He looked like a man losing a deadly struggle, which he probably was.

Drake's breathing became shallow. When he spoke his voice held the tension of a man who was trying to concentrate on performing two difficult tasks at once. 'I see,' he said. 'There was a plague. It struck down the local population after the moon-strike. This one thinks the world has come to an end. That these are the end-times.'

'As far as these people are concerned he could be right,' said Grimnar.

'He thinks we are daemons,' Drake said. 'More specifically he thinks you

are.’

It was easy to see how a heretic could have got that impression of the Space Wolves.

‘Was the plague released deliberately?’ Macharius asked.

Drake’s expression went blank for a moment. The local ground his teeth. ‘He does not know. It’s possible. The plague could be a weapon.’

‘Even if it is,’ Grimnar said, ‘it might not have been released deliberately. The hive took terrible damage when the moon-strike hit. If the plague was being stored in an incubator it might have got loose by accident.’

‘How did this one survive when so many died?’ Macharius asked.

‘There are always those who are immune to diseases,’ Drake said. ‘They have resistance. Even to the most virulent of plagues. This one may have it and there will be others. It should be possible to create a serum against the disease from his blood.’

Macharius spoke into the comm-net, ordering all precautions against contamination to be redoubled. We had all been exposed to the plague now.

‘How long did it take to strike people down?’ Macharius asked.

‘It all happened within hours of the impact.’

‘Right through the hive?’ Macharius said. ‘That does not sound like an accident.’

‘You’re right. I also suspect that the whole population might have been particularly susceptible to this plague.’

‘You mean it was intended to harm them.’

‘Yes. Tailored to their genetic runes, so it spread swiftly and fatally.’

There was silence. There was no need to ask why. It was a recruiting drive on Richter’s part, to bring about an army of the dead. I had no doubt that it would only be a matter of time before we met them. I thought of all the corpses on the fields outside. They had been activated by the gas shells fired upon us.

‘Gas,’ I said. ‘They will introduce it into the life support systems once the disease has had time to do its work.’

‘They’ve probably started already,’ Drake said. ‘That’s what that greenish stuff is.’

‘We need to find Richter and quickly,’ Macharius said, ‘otherwise we will be cutting our way through a whole city of the walking dead.’

Drake smiled. ‘I know where to find Richter.’

Macharius looked at him. ‘How?’

‘His palace is below us. Everyone in the city knows where the Chosen One lives. Even these maggots.’

‘The Chosen One?’ Macharius asked.

‘The warlord from the sky. He bears the Sacred Amulet of the Lord of Mortality,’ Drake said. His eyes were closed once more and he seemed to be plucking the words directly from the hiver’s mind. ‘He was the first living man in ten thousand years to enter the Vault of the Great One and live. He came out bearing the symbol of their daemon god’s power. That is why they follow him without question. That is why the plague priests believe he will lead them forth from this place to conquer the galaxy.’

Grimnar laughed. ‘I have heard such stories before on a hundred worlds. They have all ended the same way.’

The hiver must have understood the Space Wolf’s tone. His religious sensibility was outraged. He did something braver than I could. He spat on the ground at the Space Wolf’s feet and gabbled something angrily in his local tongue.

‘He says the Chosen One will kill you. He is invincible. He cannot be slain.’

Grimnar took no offence. ‘I have heard that one before too. I will tear his heart out and make him eat it.’

‘We move,’ Macharius said. ‘Now.’

Not even the Space Wolf disagreed with him.

Richter’s palace was located exactly at the centre of the hive, spread over multiple levels, with an enormous dome above it. The area around it looked as if it had once been a park or a garden of a very strange sort. There were fungal trees which looked as if they had once been landscaped. Clouds of spores swarmed the air and webs of slime clung to the great mushroom-like structures. Everything looked diseased and strange. There were bodies strewn everywhere, blotched with black mould. Some of the corpses hung on what looked like ropes of snot. Others had become so overgrown with fungus that they were being held upright by it. The mould appeared to have emerged from within their bodies and turned them into strange pillars. In some places a dozen or so of the overgrown corpses had been piled together and looked like a disturbing many-headed, many-limbed statue.

Here, as in so many other places around the hive, the moon-strike had done its work. The area around the palace was filled with rubble and the central structure had suffered as well. There had been emplacements and turrets in its sides. There still were but most of them were broken, their weapons twisted piles of scrap, the fortifications cracked and splintered. That did not mean they were useless. Right now I could see figures moving up there, for the first time since we had reached the city. It looked like there were living inhabitants.

I considered that for a moment. They were moving, but that did not mean they had to be alive. I turned the periscope of the Leman Russ to bear on them and saw that cowled and cloaked figures garbed in green and brown, their garments stitched with unholy runes, appeared to be performing rituals amid diseased-looking cultists in the garb of soldiers. Glowing nimbuses of light surrounded the priestly figures. The soldiers seemed involved in more mundane tasks, bringing weapons to bear on us.

Even before Macharius spoke orders into the comm-net, our tanks opened fire. Shots flashed between the palace and our army. And already the Space Wolves were in motion, racing through the fungal gardens, heading towards the building in which Richter and his allies lurked.

‘A ritual is being performed here,’ said Drake. ‘This is the centre of all the evil in this world.’

‘Then it must be cleansed,’ said Macharius. The first wave of tanks raced forward, moving towards the obscene forest. As they did so, spores erupted from the trees and began to clog their treads. As they ploughed into the trees, tendrils of mucus erupted and sprayed over them, coating hatches and exhaust pipes, to no visible or immediate effect.

The tanks pushed forward, slower than before. The guns in the side of the palace opened fire, concentrating on the lead vehicles and turning them into smoking wreckage. A leading Leman Russ exploded and the flames transformed its surroundings into blackened muck, which formed a swift-hardening tar, sucking at the tracks of the vehicles that followed.

It became clear that the plants were not there simply for decoration but formed as much of a defensive barrier as a minefield. A crewman bailed out of a brewed-up Leman Russ and dived for cover. One of the fungus-covered corpses came to life and grabbed him, hugging him close. Even as I watched, the mass of spores covering the animated corpse shifted to the

Imperial Guardsman, flowing over his body, covering his eyes, entering his mouth and his lungs, choking him. The luckless man collapsed onto the ground and sprawled there.

Macharius considered this for a moment and then gave orders. A wave of incendiaries descended on the fungal forest, setting it alight. More of the black sludge appeared where the mushroom trees went up. They caught fire, exploding and popping in the extreme heat.

While this was happening the heretics kept a stream of fire pouring down on us, and I noticed now that more and more bodies were starting to appear around us, shambling into place, moving to attack us. The walking dead had risen to do battle once more.

Reports came in from the back of our column. The soldiers there were under attack from an army of the walking dead. At the moment they did not seem to be any great threat to the tanks, but they were costing ammunition and distracting our forces.

A heartbeat later I heard the faint sound of distant explosions and screams and static buzz on the comm-net. It seemed like something had, after all, managed to destroy at least one of our tanks. A shiver passed through me. How could walking dead men manage to destroy an armoured vehicle? They were strong and their mindlessness made them fearless, but that was just not physically possible.

Macharius asked for reports from the vehicles nearby. His head tilted to one side. Clearly someone had seen something. He ordered the tanks of the rear-guard to keep firing, gave clear, clipped, concise instructions and then fell silent.

‘What is it?’ Drake asked.

Macharius looked at him. ‘Some of the corpses had bombs attached to them. And there were heretics concealed in the masses of walking dead, using them as cover to get close enough to use grenades and anti-tank weapons.’

As I listened a vision of what had happened became clear. Our boys had been overconfident, simply running the undead over, splattering them under the tracks of their vehicles. The enemy had used that to their advantage and closed. Now our troops were being forced to expend ammunition on them. Macharius did not need to explain the implications of that to anyone. We

did not have unlimited ammo. The enemy had an almost unlimited supply of walking corpses.

I imagined what I would do if I were them. Now we were firing at the oncoming horde, the heretics could pull back and let our troops exhaust their ammunition on the fearless walking dead. If our soldiers looked like slacking, they could renew their attacks with anti-tank weapons and grenades until they forced us to start shooting again.

It was a tactic that favoured them. Sooner or later our troops would tire or run out of ammunition. The heretics had a whole hive city of walking dead to draw on. We would run out of bullets and shells before they ran out of bodies to throw at us.

Macharius swiftly gave orders dividing our force into six columns and sent a column to cover each entrance into the plaza. The powerful Leman Russ war machines formed a barricade across the main entrances that would be all but impossible for the walking dead to pass through while the tanks had ammunition. A dozen tanks could block the widest of the entrances and the remainder formed a ring around them, turrets facing outwards, to cover any lesser approaches and to keep firing at the palace.

It was not a perfect plan but it would keep us safe for as long as we could keep shooting. It left two columns to work with. One was to form a flying reserve to interdict any enemy force that broke through or appeared unexpectedly. The last column, led by Macharius himself, was to take the palace.

Watching the Lord High Commander at work I was reassured. He had risen to the challenge swiftly and well. We might not make it out of the citadel alive but it would not be for want of trying.

More reports came in over the comm-net, this time from the Space Wolves. They had blazed a path through the fungal forest, had secured one entrance and were spreading out through the palace, killing any enemy they encountered.

Drake was listening in and said, ‘They are hideously outnumbered in there. Even if one Space Wolf is worth a hundred heretics.’

‘In those circumstances more like a thousand, but you are correct,’ Macharius said. ‘They will need our aid, although they would not thank me for saying so.’

I had seen Grimnar in action before and it was easy to imagine him stalking silently through the palace ahead, picking off enemies and retreating into the shadows to strike again. Even so, given the number of enemies in there, all they could really do in the long run was buy us time by distracting them.

Also, it has to be said that Macharius was not a man to let anyone else, even the mighty Adeptus Astartes, do his fighting for him. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye and saw there was something feverish about him. Here was a man who might be entering the last great battle of his life, facing his last test, seeing his last chance to grasp at glory. He had won every major battle except his last one here on Loki. He did not want to leave this life with an account unsettled. He did not want his last campaign to leave a mark on his unbroken string of victories. He had one last enemy to take down, Richter, and he wanted to be there at the kill. He knew he was dying and he wanted to go out in a blaze of glory. That was what I thought, at least.

He gave the order for the final column to advance towards the palace. At his command we laid down a curtain of fire, not at the palace, not at its defenders, but at the obstacles in our way. The hail of fire smashed through the blazing fungus. The sticky tar beneath the treads slowed the tanks but did not stop them.

Then the enemy opened fire with incendiaries and I saw the purpose of that dark residue. It caught fire, blazing up with incredible heat. It was something that would have fried an infantryman on the spot, but a tank is massive and it takes some time to heat.

‘Push on!’ Macharius ordered. We drove forward into a curtain of flame.

I held my breath. I could see nothing except flames and oily smoke ahead of me. I was simply driving forward in the direction of the palace entrance as I remembered it and praying to the Emperor that we did not deviate too far from the line.

There was nothing out there that I could think of that would deflect us by sheer mass, but even a slight inclination caused by an obstruction could shift us a fraction of a degree out of line and the cumulative effect of those might cause a lot of drift. I was tempted to make adjustments to the controls, but that way, too, might lead to disaster. My own imagination

could take us out of the correct line.

Something smashed down into the Russ from above. The guns on the palace walls were still firing at us. The Leman Russ shook under the impact but its armour held.

‘Keep moving, Lemuel,’ Macharius said. His voice was calm and confident. ‘We will soon be under the angle the guns can fire at.’

In his head, he was keeping the speed and range of our tank to the palace as well as all the other factors in the battle. He started giving out orders in response to reports coming in from the gates behind us. It sounded like the walking dead were attacking in force.

Ahead a burning man emerged from the flames. His flesh had been seared black but still he struggled to move. The dead were rising even in the former fungal forest but the flames incinerated them as that happened. It was a small mercy but I was grateful for it.

Suddenly we were clear of the fire. Ahead of us I could see a massive ornate staircase, flanked by two huge statues of diseased angels. Both were cowled. Both had great bat-wings rising from their backs. One of them had a skeletal face, the lower half of which was covered in a rebreather mask. The other apparently depicted a man in the throes of a plague. He was smiling malevolently, his mouth a death’s head rictus, his eyes narrowed in glee. The statues were so realistic they appeared to be alive.

I aimed the Leman Russ at the stairwell and drove up it, splintering the marble beneath the treads of the tank. The vehicle roared up and I glanced out ahead of us. Space Wolves held the hallway beyond us, crouched in cover behind pillars and obscene statuary. A hail of incoming fire splashed over us, until our own guns spoke in response.

A grinding sound behind us told me that other vehicles had arrived. I nudged the Leman Russ forward as gently as I could into the hallway, and pulled up, hull down alongside a stagnant ornamental pool. We could take the tank no further.

The guns kept firing. Macharius reached up and flipped the seal above him, opening the hatchway and pulled himself out. I followed swiftly, determined to guard him with my life.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I went up through the hatch, unslinging my shotgun, feeling the warmed metal of the hull vibrate beneath my feet. I risked a glance around and saw more and more Leman Russ emerge at the top of the stairs. There were so many of them now that the entrance way was all but blocked. Behind the tanks, towers of flame leapt and danced, and clouds of oily smoke spiralled upwards towards the roof of the hive.

I looked around and saw that the ornamental pool held scummy, stagnant, diseased-looking water. It was greenish and clogged with algae. Obscenely fat, whitish, slug-like bodies floated in it. Most of them bore the exploded-from-the-inside look that I associated with bolter shells.

There were corpses everywhere. Every single one of them either had its head torn off or its skull destroyed by bolter fire. The Space Wolves were taking no chances of having their foes return from death to trouble them again. I suspected it was less because the thought bothered them than because they did not want to waste the time.

The palace might have been beautiful once. There was a lot of marble and a lot of statuary but the place was *contaminated*. That was the only word I could think of to describe it. Things were blotched by mould and covered in curtains of mucus. A statue raised both hands to the sky, a bolter held between them. Yellowish slime dripped from under its arms. Paintings on the walls were covered in a fur of whitish mould. Small things scuttled everywhere. They might have been rats, they might have been beetles or

they might have been some unholy hybrid of both.

Who could dwell amid all of this, I wondered? No one sane.

Macharius jumped from the side of the tank and landed on the edge of the pool. He kept his balance like a great cat. I dropped after him, and my boots slipped on the slimy lip at the water's edge and I almost tumbled in. I flailed my arms to keep my balance, somehow pulled myself upright and let myself drop to the ground. The thought of touching the polluted liquid made me shudder. Ivan dropped down from the side of the tank directly to the ground, which struck me as entirely more sensible.

Drake and the two members of his guard joined us. More troops moved up all around, taking cover where they could find it. Macharius moved over to one of the pillars to join Grimnar and his honour guard. The Space Wolf grinned at us, revealing his sharp fangs. He was not wearing a helmet or a rebreather here and seemed to feel no need for one.

'Glad you could finally join us,' he said. 'These unbelievers are most unwelcoming towards the Allfather's Chosen.'

'This is where the traitor Richter is,' Macharius said. 'We shall find him.'

'Of course, Lord High Commander,' said the Space Wolf. 'It will take more than a few thousand of these heretics to stop us.'

'What have you found out so far?'

The Space Wolf indicated the mould on the wall with one armoured finger. With no squeamishness whatsoever he drew a swift map of the entrance hall and the surrounding area using his finger. Once he tilted his head to one side as if listening to something and then drew a swift correction. He was obviously picking up reports from his scouts still.

I studied the diagram. It was large and covered a score of rooms radiating out from our position. One large corridor ran ahead and it had chambers running off it. An x marked rooms that had been cleared; a large number of them marked the map.

Grimnar started another map, indicating the levels above us. He sketched in the balconies on which the heavy weapons were mounted and swiftly marked those destroyed as well. It looked like he had cleared the area overlooking the route we had taken into the palace even as we advanced. It was an astonishing feat considering how few warriors he had compared to the defenders.

'The majority of the heretics were hardly fit to be counted as foes, more

like target practice,’ he said and laughed. It was an eerie sound. I could not detect anything like human mirth in it although his face showed something of the expression of a man making a joke. ‘There are some present who appear much tougher than others. They have been changed.’

‘Changed?’ Drake asked.

‘They look diseased but in their cases their illness makes them stronger and faster and feel pain less. They show signs of mutation.’

‘Suffer not a mutant to live,’ said Drake.

‘Indeed. Though the stigmata these ones bear may be signs of their disease.’

‘You mean the plague within them causes mutation.’

‘It may be. I have encountered such things before among the worshippers of the Ruinous Powers. They shout the name of Nurgle as they fight and claim they are blessed even as we slay them.’

I saw Drake give a small shudder when the name Nurgle was mentioned. I knew why. The sound had the same effect on me. ‘The Father of Pestilence has this world in its grip.’

Grimnar tilted his head to one side, gestured extravagantly and showed the inquisitor a sardonic grin. ‘What gave it away?’

Drake stood up primly. He was not used to being mocked, but for all his power he was not fool enough to challenge one of the Emperor’s Chosen.

‘This is invaluable information,’ said Macharius. ‘What else can you tell us?’

‘Monsters roam the corridors deeper in the building. More mutant creatures like great plague-riddled slugs. Our most advanced scouts report encountering alchemical laboratories with tank-grown abominations. They have cleansed those with fire and chainsword.’

I did not like the picture Grimnar was painting with his words but there was nothing I could do about it. We were going to have to fight our way deeper into the building – that seemed certain – and we were going to find horrors there. I consoled myself with the thought that it would not be the first time, but it came to me then that I had always had men there with me at the time, Anton and others, who had seemed in some ways immortal. Now even Macharius had lost his aura of invincibility. The shadow of mortality hung over him.

‘Also, we have found some interesting altars,’ Grimnar said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘It would be best if I showed you.’

We moved forward from the main entrance hall. The firing had slackened off as the heretic counter-attack faltered. We kept to the walls, picking our way through more headless corpses until we found the entrance to another chamber. This one was heaped with bodies and it was clear that the heretics had fought hard to keep it from the Space Wolves.

In the centre of the room was a massive altar. Great pipes ran from it to the walls. They had an organic look, as if they were alive. On the altar itself were numerous skulls, gilded with metal. They reminded me of the servo-skulls of Cardinal Septimus. Light flickered within their eyes. As we entered they spoke, emitting what sounded like curses in a language I did not understand. I wondered why the Space Wolves had not destroyed this accursed object. It did not seem like them to spare any obscenity created by the enemies of man.

We advanced into the room and I noticed there were Adeptus Astartes keeping guard at all of the entrances. They had quite obviously been stationed here and told to hold their position. Given how outnumbered Grimnar’s men were they must have thought this thing important. Drake rubbed his hands together like a man well pleased.

He said something in what sounded like the language the skulls were speaking and they responded as if to a catechism. ‘What is it?’ Ivan asked. Drake shot him a look, warning him to be silent, and kept speaking. This went on for long minutes. The inquisitor’s hands danced over the altar moving dials and pushing sliders. All the while an aura of psychic fire played around his head.

Macharius and Grimnar watched him. Their expressions gave nothing away, but I sensed a tension in the Lord High Commander. The Space Wolf looked interested, as if watching a show put on for his amusement.

The skulls’ chanting took on an aspect of horrific plainsong. Some of their voices seemed to gurgle, some were so high as to sound like screams. Eventually Drake said, ‘I have the key to the thing now. Richter is indeed here and so is the traitor.’

He returned to chanting and the air over the altar swirled as a holo-sphere came into being. It displayed a complex array of lines that I realised were a

map of the palace. A blue area represented our position. A red area much deeper in the three-dimensional structure represented what I presumed was our target. Even as I watched it started to flicker and disintegrate, coming apart in lightning-like flickers and the smell of ozone. The singing skulls' voices changed until they were static screeches, howls of the damned.

'It seems someone objected to my intrusion,' said Drake. 'Did you get it?'

He looked at one of his bodyguards who nodded. 'Yes,' said Macharius.

Grimnar growled. 'I could find my way there.'

I doubted I could have from the brief glimpse of the map and the route, but it seemed I did not need to. All that was required was that I follow those who did.

'As can I,' said Macharius. 'Let us go and settle our scores and then leave this accursed place.'

Macharius formed us up in companies. Ivan and Drake and Grimnar went with him, surrounding him. I was also part of that select crew. The Space Wolves moved along in advance of us, scouting the ways. They moved along parallel corridors too, making sure we were not flanked.

We passed an elevator going down. Macharius did not even look at it. In combat it would be madness to take such a thing. They could be turned into death traps with very little effort. Instead we pressed on towards the first stairway. From up ahead we could hear the sounds of fighting.

The enemy must have known from the images Drake had conjured out of their data grid where we were headed. Heretics held the head of the stairs, lying down where they met the landing, providing as small a target as was possible.

Grimnar snapped off a command as well as a shot, and the heretic heads exploded. Guns skittered from their suddenly loosened grips. A grenade came arcing up the corridor towards us. Grimnar stepped forward, snapped it from the air and returned it to where it came with one throw. The resulting explosion sent gobbets of flesh flying.

A greenish cloud rose above the site of the explosion. I wondered whether it was a by-product of the grenade or from the bodies it had hit. The plague-infected corpses of previous battlefields were still on my mind.

'There are other routes,' Macharius said. 'We can easily be bottle-necked if we take only one approach.' He gave orders to the company commanders

and sent them moving in the direction of different stairwells.

We moved down the stairwell, passing through the hovering green cloud. Bloated flies with chemically coloured thoraxes buzzed against the visor of my rebreather. There was a horrible glow in their eyes and pus dripped from their tails as if they contained poisoned stingers.

I slapped at one as it landed on my arm. The thing squelched, leaving a greenish stain on the cloth of my tunic. I heard a man gasp and turned to see one of the Lion Guard clutching at his arm. He looked as if he had been stung.

Drake raised his arms. An aura of fearsome power crackled around his head. He gestured and a wave of force erupted from his fists. Suddenly small orbs of greenish-yellow light blazed in the air. The flies burst and splattered with a strange frying sound.

'Who was stung?' Drake asked. Half a dozen Guardsmen replied in the affirmative. Drake's eyes narrowed and he stepped over to the nearest. He gestured to one of his guards, who produced a blade and sliced at the man's tunic. The man's pale skin was blotched and where the insect had stung him was already starting to swell. Drake indicated again and his bodyguard sliced at the swelling. A small amount of yellowish pus bled out. 'Dress it,' he told the affected soldier and moved along the line. 'Anyone else who was affected should do the same thing.'

There was something about his voice that brooked no argument. I saw men begin to slice at their own flesh through their tunics.

'What is it?' Macharius asked. He kept his voice low but I was close enough to hear.

'Those flies were contaminated and their venom was too. Draining it may help.'

I did not like the way he said it. His tone made it sound as if he thought the victims were already dead. His bodyguards studied the wounded as if considering killing them. I am sure if Drake had given the command they would have.

We followed the stairs down. Grimnar went in the lead. I followed him and then Ivan. Macharius, Drake and his bodyguards remained close behind. My skin crawled as we went down. One grenade might take out all of us. Perhaps Grimnar with his superhuman reflexes and his ceramite armour

might survive. I was pretty certain the rest of us would not.

My heart thumped against my ribs as we reached the foot of the stairs. We looked out into a hall, at least a kilometre on either side and with a ceiling perhaps twenty metres high. Glass tanks lined the walls and in each, attached to the walls by an umbilical, floated bodies. They were not corpses. Each was the size of a full-grown adult man. Some had no skins, and flesh and muscle were visible for all to see. Some were still growing stomachs or hearts or internal organs.

It looked as if this was the place where Richter was growing his soldiers.

The floor of the hall was covered in more huge tanks, all filled with greenish fluids. The aisles between them were as wide as roads. In the tanks more bodies floated. These ones looked nearer completion. They had skin and features and as we walked by them their heads turned and their pinkish eyes followed us. I was reminded of the soldiers we had fought on the battlefields near Skeleton Ridge, but these warriors were larger and their faces were more wicked. There was a malign intelligence in their eyes, as if something ancient and evil looked out through them. I told myself I was imagining things but it was hard not to feel a shiver of suppressed nervousness when I passed them.

Hands reached out as I did so. White palms pressed flat against armourglass and I knew that, if they could, those floating figures would gladly have grabbed me and strangled me. As it was their hands and feet made constant slow bumping sounds as we passed them.

I felt the urge to turn the shotgun on the tank and shoot but I resisted. The pellets might not be able to break the armourglass and we would all be caught in the ricochet. And something whispered in my mind that being touched by that greenish fluid would be very unwise should the glass break.

The company spread out, moving along the aisles between the tanks. I kept close to the Lord High Commander. I made sure the shotgun was always pointing more or less directly along the aisles, not wanting to risk the consequences of me being right about the tanks.

Over each tank were metal pipes that obviously fed chemical supplies into the fluid. Walkways ran along the side of the pipes and every so often ladders led up to them. I kept looking upwards, fearing that they would make a good site for an ambush.

We passed a junction between aisles still following the route Macharius

had mapped out for us in his head. Grimnar sniffed the air and looked up. I followed his glance and saw a heretic lift himself up from the top of the overhead pipes and raise something in his hand. He got no further before Grimnar shot him.

Warned by some instinct I turned my head to the walkway on the other side. More figures were rising there. Most of them held bolt pistols or autoguns but one of them had raised his arm as if about to throw a grenade. I lifted the shotgun and pulled the trigger, sending him tumbling backwards. Screaming and kicking he splashed down into one of the tanks. There was a muffled explosion and green liquid gouted upwards into the air. The pressure of the blast cracked and splintered the glass. Snot-coloured fluid spilled forth onto the floor.

I raced to the nearest ladder, slung the shotgun and pulled myself up towards the pipes.

A hail of fire descended from above and was met by a response from the Lion Guard. It all sounded incredibly loud in my ears. I clambered upwards, rung by rung, hoping that everyone else was too focused on the firefight to notice me.

The people on the pipes I was climbing towards could not see me in my current position, but all it would take would be for one of them to lean outwards. The heretics on the opposite side had a clear shot at my back. I felt a constant crawling sense of anticipation between my shoulders. At any moment I expected to feel a surge of pain in my back and then experience a swift fall into oblivion.

I resisted the temptation to take a look over my shoulder. It would do me no good and I needed to put all my effort into the climb. I counted rungs. Nine, ten, eleven. The itch between my shoulders became almost unbearable.

Twelve, thirteen. I was almost at the top. A shot clattered off the pipe near me. I felt something sting the skin of my arm but I did not let it distract me. I pulled myself up once more, looked over the edge of the pipe and found myself exchanging glances with a green-faced corpse. Its skin was marked with boils and blotches. Pus leaked from its eyeballs, oddly discoloured blood from a sucking wound in its chest. I glanced along the walkway and saw nothing but corpses there. They had tumbled from the pipe above.

I pulled myself onto the walkway and my boot squelched on the dead body

that had first met my gaze.

I kept my head down and tried to keep out of the line of fire of my comrades on the ground. I unslung the shotgun, took a deep breath, tried to calm my racing heart and sprung upright, half expecting to get my head blown off. I saw more cultists along the top of the pipe. Some had fallen. Some of them were crouching. Some were snapping off shots.

They were ugly men with strange reddish eyes. They wore no rebreathers or protective masks and their skin was covered in abscesses, warts and boils. They bore the marks of a dozen different diseases and yet appeared to feel no ill effects from most of them.

One or two of them moved oddly, like men whose coordination was impaired. Some of them bled from large wounds, but that did not seem to slow them down.

One of them had lost the fingers of one hand, not to our gunfire but to what looked like para-leprosy. His nose was gone too, leaving an empty crater in the middle of his face. From the way he shouted orders, he seemed to be the leader. That made him an instant and obvious target.

I lifted the shotgun and pulled the trigger. Half-hand threw himself off the pipe and into space. My shot missed him and cut through the heretics standing behind. I pumped the shotgun, pulled the trigger again and cut down a few more.

Half-hand landed below me. His legs gave way as if broken and still he gave no sign of feeling any pain. It was as if every nerve in his body were dead. He pulled himself up and swung his pistol to bear on Macharius. The general was faster and blew his head to smithereens with a single shot.

The rungs of the ladder creaked below me. Something massive catapulted overhead. Grimnar had joined me on the walkway. He ran along, shooting and cleaving with his chainsword. Nothing could stop him. Shots puffed up around his feet and pinged off his armour, threatening to overbalance him, and still he moved on.

I glanced around and saw enemies firing at him from the top of the facing pipe. I blasted them while their attention was distracted and I was glad it was. I did not have the Space Wolf’s armour or his eye-blurring speed to protect me, and the guard-rails of the walkway would provide me with no cover.

I was lucky. I managed to take out half a dozen of the enemy fighters

while my comrades climbed up the ladder on the opposite side. I could see there were no more than twenty of the enemy there. Judging by the screams there were few of the heretics left on my side of things. Grimnar was seeing to that.

I looked down and saw a web of cracks had appeared in the armourglass of the great tank. Macharius was already clear, along with Drake and his guards, when the glass gave way. The greenish fluid and shards of crystal sprayed over our nearby troops.

Men screamed, flesh gouged by translucent shrapnel. Some of them shrieked oddly. Some of them tore off their masks. Viscous slime stained their faces and dripped from their rebreathers. It looked like the fluid had found its way in through badly adjusted mouthpieces or impaired filters and the side effects looked anything but pleasant.

I looked around for Ivan, hoping that he was not numbered among the fallen. I caught no sight of him until I looked up at the opposite ramp and saw him there. His bolt pistol was in his hand and he was snapping off shots. He looked as strange and ungainly as the cultists without his bionic arm but its absence did not slow him.

I heard more screams below and looking down saw that some of the white bodies that had been in the tank were flopping towards our troops. They moved with a malevolent mindfulness that suggested that they had been aware of what was going on the whole time. They clutched at men's ankles, and slowed them down. When men fell, they went for the throat with their blotched teeth.

Grimnar had cleared my section of the piping now. I could not fire into the melee below with the shotgun, so I advanced along the walkway behind the Space Wolf, took aim at the enemy across the gap and pulled the trigger. The shotgun kicked and cultists died. I took another step and fired again. In short order the ambush site was cleared.

Below us were more casualties, from enemy fire, from the splintered tanks, from the newborn monsters. It did not stop us though. We continued our advance through the hall.

The place seemed endless, lit with a daemonic emerald glow, filled with the bubbling sound from the life-vats and the gurgling of chemicals through the pipes. There were more ambushes and more killing but we were ready for them now, and fell into the rhythm of clearing them.

As we neared the exit from the hall, I heard screaming again behind me.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY

It came from one of the soldiers who had been stung by the diseased insects on the stairwell. He was clutching at his arm, and howling curses and imprecations. There was agony in his voice and madness in his eyes and I started to understand why as I moved closer to see if I could help him.

Small boils had erupted on his skin. They had spread out from the place where he had been stung. At first I thought it was a trick of the light, some weird distortion caused by the lenses of my rebreather mask, but as I squinted I could see I was wrong. The lumps in the man's skin were shifting. One of them crawled beneath the flesh on the back of his hand. Another had reached his throat and was moving up towards his jaw. There were further ripples beneath the sleeves of his tunic.

The lump on his jaw moved across his cheek, heading towards his eye. There was something eerie about it, like watching some evil spell doing its work. I wondered if it was some new disease or the result of daemonic influence. Even as that thought ran through my mind, a blue, chitinous fly erupted from the soldier's eye in a spurt of jelly and a clicking of mandibles. Dragonfly-like wings stretched wetly and the creature prepared to take to the air.

The infected man brought his fist crunching down on it even as more and more of the creatures erupted from his flesh. They had a wet, glistening, newborn look to them. I brought my boot down on one, even as the dying man rolled over to crush others. From down the line came more screams

and I guessed that more of the infected soldiers were discovering what they carried.

The insects were slow and dazed, at least at first, and easy enough to kill, but some of them slipped away and I had an uneasy feeling that they might infiltrate my clothing or suddenly appear when I least expected it.

Men were swiftly assigned to stand guard over the wounded and the company moved on. I returned to Macharius's side. Drake was speaking.

'Confusion and demoralisation. That is their purpose. We must leave men to look after the wounded or we reduce morale yet further.'

Macharius gave a weary smile. 'Those men knew what their lives became worth when they joined the Imperial Guard. They know what is going to happen to them. We cannot take them with us for they are time bombs waiting to go off. Any who have been infected must be left behind. We cannot risk another outbreak at a crucial time.'

Drake nodded. The sound of bullets began to be heard from behind and a commissar emerged from the line. 'I have made sure we will suffer no liability from those men, Lord High Commander.'

Macharius nodded and with a curt gesture indicated that we should proceed.

From ahead came the roar of bolter fire. The howl of Space Wolves echoed through the great hall of the vats. In response came the eerie chanting of diseased fanatic voices and the thunder of autoguns.

Macharius indicated that we should advance. I took charge of a section and raced forward up a flight of stairs. I entered what looked like a demented combination of a temple and a sorcerous laboratory. Vast carved idols, resembling the huge daemon I had seen in my fever dreams, flanked a gigantic altar that crackled with magical energy. From an area behind the altar a strange glow emerged along with the sound of bestial chanting.

I glanced around, taking in an evil parody of an Imperial cathedral. There were nooks in which statues of what might have been plagued saints stood, and smaller altars were arranged along the walls. Galleries lined the higher walls. Perhaps once a congregation of Chaos worshippers had howled prayers to their evil gods there. Now they were packed with armed men, firing down at us.

Half a dozen Space Wolves did battle against an army of disease-infected,

plague-worshipping mutants. Richter's palace guards were almost as large as the Adeptus Astartes. They were armed with bolters and marked by the stigmata of a dozen diseases. Their eyes were pinkish, their flesh blotched. Running sores wept greenish pus but seemed to leave their owner's fighting ability unimpaired.

A score of them opened fire on a running Space Wolf. A trail of shells chewed up the carved pews through which the Space Marine ran in search of cover. One of the shells took him in the shoulder, exploded and twisted him around. Another took him through the throat. Another impacted on his chest-plate, breaking it open and revealing flesh and bone beneath.

Still the Space Wolf kept moving. He raised his bolter and snapped off a shot at one of the heretics, removing his head, then he fired again and again, killing two more Nurgle worshippers. Sensing blood their comrades kept pouring on the firepower. More shots hit the exposed innards where the ceramite carapace had been torn away, ripping through flesh and doing terrible damage to the Space Wolf.

I noticed that his bones were not like normal human bones. They were larger and in places had fused together to form what appeared to be another layer of armour around vulnerable internal organs, but not even that was enough to save the luckless Space Marine.

He must have sensed that his death was upon him for he changed direction in an eye-blink and ran into the hail of fire. I did not think anything living could move through the storm of death around him but somehow he closed the distance with the cultists and was among them, bolter still spitting death. He reached out with one armoured hand and crushed the skull of the nearest heretic, broke the neck of another and then stumbled and fell backwards as the heretics hit him with a dozen shots. Even then he managed one last discharge of his own bolter before falling to the ground dead.

For a moment there was silence. The entire chamber was aware that some enormity had occurred. All around echoed the howling war cries of the Space Wolves as if they had, at that moment, sensed the death of their battle-brother and gave vent to their mourning.

I froze for a second, scanning the chamber from the top of the stairs, then I ordered my men down and directed them to shoot at the cultists in the

gallery above.

Seconds later I heard the roars of the Space Wolves coming closer, as they converged upon the spot where their comrade had fallen. Although the sound was redolent of wild fury, and the faces of the Space Marines were transformed by feral rage, nothing impaired their fighting ability.

Several of them gave Grimnar and their brothers covering fire as they advanced, putting out such a storm of bolter fire that they pinned down the enemies most likely to shoot. Once in position Grimnar and his companions then gave their comrades covering fire as they advanced. Thus they moved forward, mutually supportive.

The heretics had made the mistake of standing gloating over the corpse. I looked up and saw one of them had painted his face with Space Marine blood. Another was chewing on the flesh as if somehow he could absorb the fallen warrior's power by this cannibalistic act. Perhaps he could. I have seen stranger things in my campaigns among the stars.

Grimnar closed with the bloody-faced one and tore his head from his shoulders. He used it as club, smashing it into the face of the cannibal, knocking him from his feet. Then in an unleashed whirlwind of violence, he tore through the Nurgle worshippers, shredding flesh and severing limbs with his chainsword, moving with such speed and ferocity the enemy never drew a bead on him.

All eyes were on the havoc being wreaked by the Space Marines. I ordered my men to follow me. I had spotted the stairwell leading to the gallery above. Now seemed to be a good time to take it. I raced across the nave of the dark temple, running along bullet-chewed pews, heavy boots clattering on the wooden seats. They had been carved with strange symbols: evil eight-pointed stars containing strange runes, skull faces leering from the centre of eight outward-pointing arrows, icons carved in a language that hurt the eye.

I could hear chanting now from deeper within the temple, a gurgling, ghastly roar that sounded as if it had been torn from the throats of a thousand diseased and dying men. The air started to thrum as if echoing to the sound of the wings of some huge insect buzzing overhead. I raced up the narrow winding stairs, praying to the Emperor that no one was waiting at the top to roll a grenade down them.

I reached the head of the stairs and looked out onto the great gallery. It had clearly been intended for the use of the local nobility. Individual carved seats were strewn across the place. On each one decaying cushions showed signs of the neglect that characterised this place. The mixture of richness and rot spoke of the insanity that ruled here. Behind the low balcony wall heretics crouched, firing down on our forces below. Their faces were a ghoulish green, scarred with the stigmata of the diseases they proudly wore. I stepped out into the gallery, making room for my men to emerge alongside me.

As I did so, one of the heretics glanced at me. Clearly he had expected reinforcements because he nodded and then did a double take. I levelled my shotgun and pulled the trigger, sending him flying backwards over the barrier to drop down into the nave below. His companions looked around, bringing their weapons to bear, and I threw myself flat behind one of the carved thrones. I heard them begin to shoot as the remainder of my squad emerged from the stairwell.

I crawled forward on my hands and knees, readied a grenade and lobbed it. It exploded amid the heretics with a deafening blast. I popped head and shoulders over the back of the seat and opened fire from almost point-blank range, sending shots ploughing through those who had survived my grenade.

The explosion had torn through part of the balcony, sending more of the heretics tumbling to their doom. One of them had survived by one of those freaks of chance that always occur somewhere on the battlefield. He must have been standing right beside where the grenade went off, and he was painted with gore, but still he stood apparently unscathed.

He launched himself towards me. Las-blasts filled the air all around as my men opened up. I pumped the shotgun but he was as quick as any Space Marine. His enormous wart-covered hand grabbed the still-hot barrel of the shotgun, almost wrenching it from my grasp. Diseased flies buzzed around his body. He smashed a massive fist into my face. The lenses of my rebreather mask shattered into a web of fine lines. The sudden stench of his body told me the filters were broken. The sickly sweet foulness of rotting flesh made me want to vomit.

I tried to hold my breath, even as stars danced before my eyes. My vision swam. Enormous hands gripped me. I thought dizziness was overwhelming

me but then I realised that he had swung me up into the air and was turning to throw me over the balcony.

I had an excellent view of the conflict far below. I could see Macharius and Drake in the midst of fighting across the nave. It was flooded now with our troops, moving forward using the pews and alcoves for cover. Beyond Macharius and the Space Wolves were ranks of chanting heretics. The air around them shimmered and swirled with a green light. Something foul seemed to be clotting out of the very air, coagulating around a human-like figure that seemed somehow familiar.

It's strange the details the mind picks out in what it thinks might be its final moments. A Space Wolf crouched over the corpse of his fallen brother, perhaps mourning, perhaps removing something from the body. I thought I saw something wet and red like an internal organ slopping within his hand. One of Drake's bodyguards looked up, and tilted his head to look straight at me. I had a good view over the long drop and struggled frantically to tear myself free from the heretic's grip, knowing that I was too late.

Las-bolts flickered through the air, searing the heretic's flesh, turning it into blackened charred meat. He grunted and raised me higher, despite his pain. I knew then that whatever happened I was going to die. Even in his death spasm he could send me catapulting into the void.

Drake's bodyguard raised his bolt pistol and did not even stop to aim. The weapon blasted and I felt the impact in the body below me. A fraction of a second later, there was an explosion and the heretic was blown backwards away from the edge, sending me tumbling back into the seats behind. A flash of pain seared my arm and I knew I had taken a glancing hit from my own side. Thoughts of Anton's accidental death filled my mind.

'Cease fire,' I bellowed. 'It's clear up here.'

The firing continued. When men are driven to the brink of madness by the presence of danger, they do not necessarily pay close attention to the orders of their superiors.

'Cease fire!' I ordered and then repeated myself again. Third time was the charm. They stopped shooting at me and the dead heretics. I waited for a few heartbeats to make sure they had definitely given up the attempt and then raised my head to order them to the balcony edge and give covering fire to our lads below.

My heart pounded against my chest. I felt giddy with relief. With one lucky shot, that bodyguard had saved my life. I made up my mind to thank him in the unlikely event that we made it out of this place alive.

As my men opened fire I found something new to worry about – my rebreather. I removed it from my face, and knocked out the lenses. I had feared that at any moment they might break, sending sharpened armourglass into my eyes. With the filter broken the mask was useless anyway. I found I was holding my breath and then realised it was pointless. I had already breathed the stinking, corrupt air anyway. I was most likely already infected with whatever disease spores were about.

I thought this way for all of thirty heartbeats before noticing that one of my own men was down. A bolter shell had taken him in the stomach. Being dead he had no use for his rebreather mask, so I removed it and put it on. It was a small thing and probably useless anyway given what I had been breathing, but it brought me a measure of comfort, and that's not something to be discounted.

The Space Wolves smashed through the heretics, backed up by the mass of the Lion Guard. They had reached all the way to the back of the place near the altar. The chanting had reached a crescendo now. The air shimmered around the glowing figure. I had a sense of dizziness and distortion. I recalled experiencing something similar before, long ago on a different world. Terrible psychic currents swirled in the air and I knew that we were reaching the climax of an unholy ritual.

Green and yellow light flickered around the heads of the cultists and illuminated their cowled forms. Macharius and Drake raced towards those performing the ritual and I realised that I was in the wrong place to protect the Lord High Commander if things went wrong. I ran along the balcony, heading towards the stairwell on the far side. I ordered my men to follow me. I knew that events were now rushing towards a climax and realised that soon it would all be over, one way or another.

I was weary and battered and dizzy. I could not tell if it was the after-effects of the heretic's blow or whether I had been infected with something. All I knew was that Macharius was down there along with Ivan and Drake and it was my duty to be with them and that I had better get down there quick.

I heard mocking laughter ringing out from the figures around the altar.

Bolter shells sprayed at them but were halted by some strange force. A shimmering aura swirled in the air above the altar and such was its potency that it could stop even the blast of a Space Marine's weapon.

I saw a man garbed in an ornate uniform, like a general. He was tall and gaunt, almost skeletal. His skin was grey and his eyes burned with a fierce internal light. So warped and changed was he that it took me a moment to recognise him. It was Richter. Something hideous and greenish glowed on his chest, an amulet of some sort, blazing with mystical energy. From its centre a monstrous eye looked out with a malignant mockery that reminded me of the great daemon of my fever dreams.

When Richter spoke, his voice was out of all proportion to his wasted form. It was rich and mellow and full of malevolent humour and it easily filled the room despite all the random background noise. Perhaps it had something to do with the acoustics of this part of the temple but I doubted it.

'Lord High Commander Macharius, we meet again,' Richter said.

Macharius replied, 'For the last time, traitor.'

'I regret that will prove to be so,' said Richter. 'You have been a most worthy foe. Bringing down the moon was a masterstroke. I salute you. I see you finally decided you could spare the world's industrial capacity. You should have done that two years ago.'

'We did not come here to bandy words with heretics,' said Grimnar. 'End this.'

Richter turned his mocking gaze on the Space Wolf. 'Ah, I see the Wolves of Fenris have not developed bigger brains or better manners over the last ten millennia.'

There was a familiarity and a contempt in Richter's voice that I had never heard the like of before and it came to me then that we were not hearing merely Richter the man, but some mighty entity speaking through him, some daemon in the service of the powers of Chaos who had a history with the Space Wolves. It was no wonder then that the general had managed to stymie even Macharius in battle, for he had access to the understanding and intelligence a daemon could provide its host.

'By the Allfather you will regret those words,' said Grimnar.

'I already regret hearing yours,' said Richter with a dismissive gesture. He gave his attention back to Macharius. 'I am glad you are here, general. We

have much to talk about.’

Grimnar leapt forward, pushing through the shimmering defensive field, his movements slowed by it, along with those of his honour guard. Richter gestured and the field coagulated around them, slowing them more and more until they could not take a step further. By a superhuman effort of will, Grimnar raised his bolter and aimed it at Richter’s head. There could not have been more than a couple of strides between them and it seemed that there was no way he could miss. His eyes blazed. His fangs were bared in a terrifying rictus.

Richter gestured, a man shooing away a fly, and Grimnar was suddenly catapulted across the room to end up sprawling against one of the cathedral pillars. The rest of his companions were forced down almost to their knees by the field of power surrounding them.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

‘As I was saying, we have much to talk about,’ Richter said.

‘I do not see how that can be the case,’ said Macharius. ‘I require only your death.’

Richter smiled. ‘You are dying, Lord High Commander. Mortality has finally caught up with you. The servants of the Father of Plagues are already working away within your body, within your brain. You have lived too long. You are not what you were. Your enemies can see this, too – and some of those you think of as friends.’

Macharius tilted his head to one side. He appeared to be listening.

‘How much longer do you have? A week? A month? Not more. And what happens to all you have achieved when you are gone? It disintegrates, torn apart by the ambition of fools. Your life is ending in defeat. All you have worked for is turning to dust. With a few more years you might have left a monument that would have endured as long as men remember. Now you will fall and your memory will fade.’

‘It is the fate of all men,’ said Macharius.

‘Not so. It has not been the fate of the False Emperor. It has not been the fate of those who have accepted the gifts of my liege lord.’

‘As you have divined, I have already had more than enough of his gifts for my liking,’ said Macharius. Drake’s gaze flickered between Macharius and Richter. He clearly did not like the way things were going here.

‘It does not have to be that way,’ said Richter. ‘My patron can reverse his

gifts. The seeds of death within you can be turned into the seeds of immortality. You do not have to die, Lord High Commander. You do not have to watch your empire turn to dust and see your legacy destroyed by lesser men. You could join with us and gain life eternal and power immeasurable.'

'You mean I could serve a daemon.'

'No. I mean you could *become* one. In the long run, you are worthy. You could become the mightiest champion of Chaos in this millennium. You could overthrow the False Emperor and take his place as the ruler of mankind.'

I should have thought Richter was lying. I should have *known* it, but instead I knew he was telling the truth. He believed what he was saying implicitly and because he did, it made him convincing. I believed him and I was not the focus of his power and attention the way Macharius was.

I thought of what it meant to be Macharius. Any man would have wavered in the face of such temptation, but Macharius had been tempted before, back on Karsk, by the Angel of Fire and I knew what he was made of.

'And all I would have to lose would be my soul,' Macharius said. His face was grim. He raised his bolt pistol and aimed it squarely at Richter.

'Go ahead and pull the trigger,' the traitor said. 'I am invulnerable to your puny weapons now. My god makes me so.'

Macharius pulled the trigger. The bolter shell ricocheted off the field of force surrounding Richter. All eyes went to it. Distracted.

Drake gestured. A bolt of psychic energy smashed into the screen and just for a moment, parted it. Macharius dived forward, his chainsword arcing down and smashing into the traitor's forehead, splitting it open as far as the nose. Bits of brain and skull spurted off the teeth of the chainsword.

Richter did not fall. He stepped away from Macharius, his eyes now several centimetres further apart than they had been but still focused on his former commander. When he spoke his words seemed to come from the surrounding air, the voice of an angry god who had been defied.

'I told you I am immortal,' he said. 'It appears you do not understand what that means.'

His flesh and bone started to knit together again, leaving his features deformed but intact. I noticed that the amulet at his throat had changed colour, losing some of its lustre as it did so. More bolter shells impacted on

his body, ripping flesh to the bone.

Instead of blood a strange green pus emerged. With a hideous sucking sound, the flesh began to flow together again, leaving the heretic's form intact but a little more deformed. I glanced around to see where the bolter shells had come from. Grimnar had risen, his carapace armour cracked and bloody. His bolter was steady in his hand. Drake's bodyguard too had taken careful aim and opened fire.

'Do not let up,' Drake shouted. 'Do not give him a chance to concentrate or we are doomed. That amulet holds awesome power.'

He unleashed another psychic bolt at Richter. The heretic screamed and shuddered and Macharius brought his chainsword down once more. Richter stepped aside and grabbed Macharius by the wrist. His strength was daemonic. Bones splintered as his fingers closed. The chainsword dropped from Macharius's grip.

The two generals went to the ground still grappling. Macharius fought like a wounded lion but Richter was stronger and appeared to feel no pain. The baleful amulet glowed on his chest as he exerted his greater strength. Macharius rolled over and over, his motions taking the two of them towards the chainsword. No one save Grimnar and Drake's bodyguards continued to pump bolter shells into the heretic's body. I held my fire for fear of hitting the Lord High Commander.

With the force field down, a melee erupted. The heretics raced forward, as did the Lion Guard. Like their leader they seemed superhumanly strong, and like him they had no doubts as to ultimate victory. I pulled the trigger on my shotgun and sent them tumbling backwards, flesh torn, but they rose again, apparently as unkillable as Richter. Their wounds knitted more slowly but the same process seemed to be in effect.

I fired again, moving towards Macharius. I heard wolf howls as more of the Space Marines recovered and hurled themselves into the battle. One of the cultists launched himself directly at me. I sidestepped and smacked him on the side of the head with the butt of the shotgun. Bone broke but the cultist still moved. His fellows opened up. A hail of bullets erupted around me. Something heavy hammered into me and I hit the ground, convinced for a moment that I had taken a bolter shell.

A heavy weight lay on top of me and I felt metal touching my flesh. I looked around and saw it was Ivan, his body riddled with bullets. He had

thrown himself forward to push me out of the way and taken the blast of fire meant for me.

'What th... Where's Anton when you need him, the useless frakker? He's the one who's supposed to stop bullets.' He looked around, the light dying in his eyes. 'Protect Macharius!'

They were the last words he said. I pulled myself out from beneath him and looked around. Macharius and Richter had rolled right over to where the chainsword lay, still sparking as its teeth bit into the rocky floor. Macharius tried to reach it but Richter was on top of him, casually battering him with his mighty hands. In the surge and press of the melee, no one else could get a clear shot. I pushed forward until I could get the barrel of the shotgun against the heretic's chest and pulled the trigger.

The shotgun kicked. The force of the blast lifted Richter off Macharius. The Lord High Commander rolled to one side and grasped the chainsword with his off-hand. He raised it up and slammed it down against the heretic's neck, pushing it forward, cutting through muscle, vein, gristle and vertebrae. The expression froze on Richter's face as his head rolled clear. Macharius grasped the chain of the amulet and tugged it from the body, pulling it away until it separated from the flesh.

A wailing noise emerged from Richter's mouth. His body suddenly collapsed in on itself like a balloon deflating. Black corruption boiled up from the middle of it. Rot spread across the flesh and drove along a tide of white mould – within a few seconds his armour was all but empty, leaving only blackened bones and a scum that might once have been his flesh. His henchmen lost all cohesion, seeing their champion defeated. Their wounds ceased to mend, as if the killing of Richter had caused his unholy sorcery to stop working.

We tore through the heretics like a chainsword through diseased flesh and then the battle for Richter's citadel was over, leaving us to count the cost.

Grimnar surveyed the carnage around the cathedral nave with something like satisfaction. He wrinkled his nose when he looked upon the outline of Richter's fallen form. He strode over to Macharius and extended a hand to aid him to his feet. Macharius was not too proud to take the Space Wolf's grip. He stood triumphant in the midst of his final battlefield.

'I thank you for your aid, Logan Grimnar,' he said. 'Whatever debt of

honour you feel you owed me is more than repaid. I am in your debt now.'

Grimnar shook his head. 'Such a battle as this is its own reward. By the Allfather, there will be those among my battle-brothers sorry to have missed this fray.'

'It is done here,' Macharius said. 'Richter is defeated.'

He looked down at the amulet he held in his hand, 'And this thing – it must be destroyed.'

He looked at the Space Wolf expectantly.

'I will see to it,' Grimnar said. 'It is a bauble not meant for mortal men.' He picked up an ammunition drum, dropped the amulet into it and then sealed it. 'This will do until it can be properly dealt with.'

He tipped his head to one side, obviously listening to something on the comm-net and then said, 'There is still a battle to be fought out there and I must go and aid my brothers. Till we meet again, Lord High Commander,' he said, tipping his arm in salute and with that he was gone.

Drake watched him go with something like an expression of relief on his face.

'It seems we have survived after all,' he said. He sounded like a man who did not quite believe it. His bodyguard returned; it seemed he had been exploring the chambers at the back of the cathedral.

'Inquisitor, Lord High Commander, there is something you should see,' he said. Drake nodded and looked inquiringly at Macharius.

'Lead on,' Macharius said, clutching his crippled hand. The pair of them moved towards the chamber. I moved to follow.

The bodyguard raised a hand. 'This is for the eyes of my master and the Lord High Commander alone.'

There was something familiar about the voice. 'I don't take your orders,' I said. 'I take them from General Macharius.'

'As you wish,' said the storm trooper.

The room was a small antechamber. The corpse of a cultist sprawled on the floor, a heavy autopistol clutched in his hand. On an altar table were spread a number of grimoires and sheets covered in strange and evil runes. Macharius stood over them and shook his head uncomprehendingly. I heard the door click closed behind me.

Drake stood alongside him, shaking his head. 'These are an unholy ritual.

With the amulet and these words, a man could draw on the Ruinous Powers. How long were these in Richter's possession, I wonder?'

'Why don't you tell me?' Macharius said.

'What do you mean?' the inquisitor asked.

'You have been in contact with him all along. That is where your information about the location of his headquarters came from.'

'I had agents in place,' said Drake.

'No. It was not as simple as that. I saw his followers. None of them were sane enough to be your agents. They had lost all semblance of intelligence long ago. Someone informed Richter of my plans. It was the only way he could have kept anticipating my moves. You saw that ranting madman. He was not capable of it.'

'Crassus,' said Drake. I saw the storm trooper bend down over the cultist's corpse, examining it as if he had found something curious.

'Crassus could not have known all the details. He was too far away, and interstellar communication is too unreliable.'

Drake sat down at the table wearily. 'He had an agent in place, just like I did.' He offered it up as if he did not expect to be believed. He was just going through the motions.

'Why?' Macharius said.

'Why what?'

'Why betray me, betray the crusade and then come here with me to die? Do you feel so guilty?'

My gaze jumped between the two of them. I felt trapped in a nightmare. Had Macharius finally fallen victim to madness? Had the idea that everyone was plotting against him cracked his mind? Or was there something to his theory? It seemed impossible. Drake had been with us so long, had supported Macharius so fervently.

'A martyr was needed,' Drake said at last. 'You were dying. What better way for you to leave the Emperor's service than in one last battle against overwhelming odds, leaving an example of service unto death.'

'And I spoiled it by winning,' said Macharius. He smiled as if he saw some humour in the situation.

The storm trooper moved so swiftly I could not even follow his actions. There was no chance to even raise my shotgun. He lifted the cultist's pistol, aimed it squarely at Macharius's head and pulled the trigger. The greatest

general of the age died victorious, with his smile still on his face.

Drake looked at his bodyguard and then at me. ‘What are you waiting for? We don’t need any witnesses. We have our martyr, gunned down by a hidden cultist in his moment of triumph.’

The pistol was turned on me. I found myself staring down its maw. I started to raise the shotgun but I had seen how fast the storm trooper was. I knew I had no chance. The pistol spoke again. I expected a blast of pain to tear through me and closed my eyes involuntarily. When I opened them again, Drake was dead, killed just as messily as Macharius. I looked at the storm trooper.

‘What?’ I said.

The storm trooper raised his visor. I saw Anna’s face. She winked at me, took my shotgun and pulled the trigger, blasting the cultist’s corpse with it. A moment later, she was gone from the chamber, announcing that a hidden assassin had killed Macharius and Drake and that I had killed them in turn.

And so all the great men died. And my friends. And I wonder to this day about what happened. There are times when I think that Anna killed Drake because, like Macharius, he had outlived his time and become a liability. There are times I think she was employed not by the inquisitor at all but by his rivals, or by the High Lords of Terra, and she was simply making sure that all the loose ends were tied up.

Which of course does not explain why she spared me. There are times when I think it was because she wanted to leave a witness who could both corroborate her story or be called upon to tell a different version if it was required. There are times when I wonder if it was because she actually cared for me. I do not know.

I do know that we fought our way out of Richter’s citadel and brought the corpses of Macharius and Drake with us. They both burned on funeral pyres. I stuck with the story Anna had given about the cultist, in part because she had spared my life, in part because it was her wish and in part because it was a better story for the Imperium. Of course Macharius died a hero in his hour of triumph. Of course Drake fell valiantly trying to protect him. Of course I cut down the heretic responsible.

And in the end it was all for nothing. Most of the men who fought on Loki died of the plagues they caught there. Macharius’s generals fell to fighting

over the spoils of the empire he had built. The Schism returned in a new form and the threat of a Secessionist empire disappeared like morning mist, if it had ever really existed.

I was decorated for killing the monster that killed two of the Imperium's heroes. Anna vanished into the night between the stars. I never saw her again and for that at least I am glad.

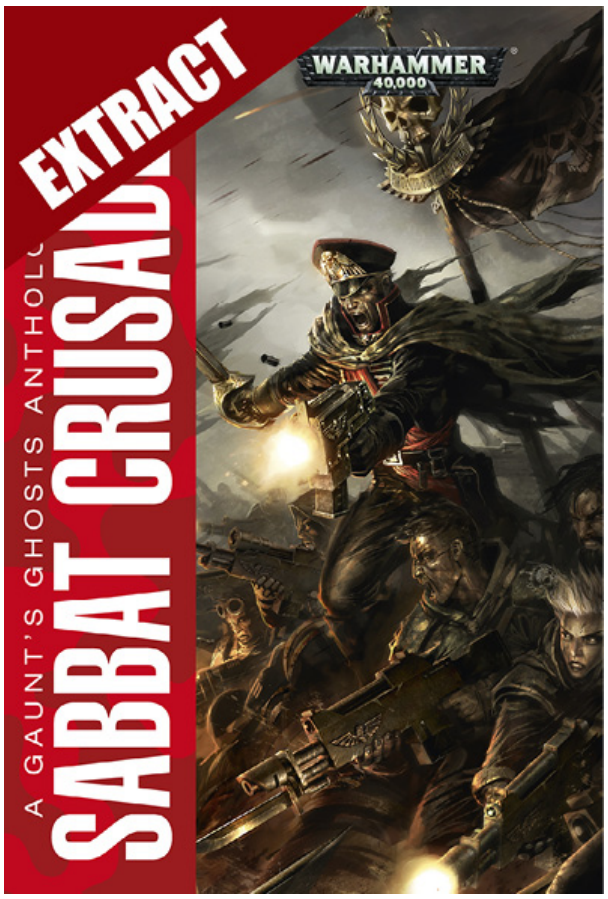
OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William King is the author of the Tyrion and Teclis saga and the Macharian Crusade trilogy, as well as the much-loved Gotrek & Felix series and the Space Wolf novels. His short stories have appeared in many magazines and compilations, including *White Dwarf* and *Inferno*!. Bill was born in Stranraer, Scotland, in 1959 and currently lives in Prague.

OceanofPDF.com

An extract from *Sabbat Crusade*.



OceanofPDF.com

GHOSTS AND BAD SHADOWS

Dan Abnett

Aigor 991, twenty-one days out from Salvation's Reach, 782.M41
(*the 27th year of the Sabbat Worlds Crusade*)

I

For the second time that day, they were making a hole in the forests.

The first hole had been made just before dawn. The *Highness Ser Armaduke*, once a proud Tempest-class frigate, now an old workhorse saved from the breaker's yard for one last, suicidal run, had dropped out of the warp six hours earlier. The ship had limped into a low orbit above Aigor 991, and hung there for a while, nose down, while the Officer of Detection mapped the northern landmass, compared the geophysical profile to Battlefleet charts, and then plotted the target resolution. As the first rays of the rising sun began to hardlight the warship's battered starboard side, the *Armaduke* fired its principal batteries at the surface.

The strike – from the *Armaduke*'s perspective just a brief flash of light on the nightside below – annihilated six acres of rainforest, and left a smoking patch of earth that was geologically stable and operationally close enough to the destination. Then the *Armaduke* launched six drop-ships: four long-pattern Arvus landers, and two Falco boats.

Aigor 991, a small, uninhabited world, was almost entirely swathed in dense rainforest across the northern continent. The forestation grew very rapidly, so any sections cleared or burned back did not stay clear for long. Aigor 991 had last been visited by a Battlefleet supply tender twenty-one

months earlier. No sign of that mission's landing clearance remained.

In the pale, rising light, the six landers had thundered in over the forest canopy and made landfall on the steaming, scorched turf the *Armaduke* had opened for them.

II

Through the trees, Gol Kolea could hear the rasp of flamers and the whicker of industrial blades. He could smell hot smoke, which had an acid bite to it, and a reek of sap so sharp that it smelled like disinfectant.

He turned, eyeing the dense forest around him. Slivers of sunlight, slender as las-beams, speared down through the canopy. Everything else was a deep emerald gloom. He was standing in shadow.

The shadow of trees. Gol didn't know much about trees, as he had not been closely acquainted with them in the rockcrete halls of Vervunhive. Ironic that he, a Verghastite, and Baskevyl, a Belladon, had been chosen to head up the surface detail; any Tanith would have loved it. Maybe that's why Gaunt had made the selection. Probably didn't want some Tanith officer getting all misty-eyed and nostalgic about forests instead of keeping his mind on the job.

'We're in the right zone?' he asked Fapes, Baskevyl's adjutant.

'Yes, sir,' Fapes replied. 'And that's the third time you've asked.'

'We're here for a resupply,' Gol snapped back. 'Promethium and munitions. Seeing as we've precious little of either, it would be a feth-fool waste to use up tanks of prom clearing the wrong zone.'

'Definitely would, sir,' Fapes replied. He raised his auspex and squinted. 'I've got a hard bounce off stone in there, and the coordinates are matched and confirmed. It's the silo.'

Remote Depot Aigor 991. Secret. Hidden. An emergency cache that the Navy kept stocked and supplied to provide for out-haul missions beyond the range of secure Navy bases and planetary yards.

The mission profile was twofold. Burn off a landing strip from orbit, and then, from there, move in to manually clear the silo location proper with flamers and servitor teams. It was too dicey to try to clear the silo location directly from orbit: a slight miscalculation could risk vaporising the cache, even given the surgical precision of Shipmaster Spika's gunnery officers.

Once the silo was opened up, freight landers could come in and start loading.

‘This is the zone, right?’ asked Major Baskevyl, approaching them through the green shadows.

‘He just asked that,’ said Fapes.

‘I just asked that,’ said Kolea.

‘Because it would be a feth-fool waste of prom if we were clearing in the wrong place,’ said Baskevyl.

‘A point already well noted,’ said Fapes.

They had six platoons between them, essentially composed of three from Kolea’s C Company, and three from Baskevyl’s D. The rest of the surface team was made up of worker servitors from the ship’s engineering and cargo divisions, plus a few Battlefleet officers as supervisors.

A squad of men from one of Baskevyl’s platoons struggled past through the undergrowth, carrying fresh promethium tanks up from the landing strip. A Navy officer, impeccable in his dark blue uniform with its silver brocade, walked with them. He was carrying precisely nothing at all, probably because he had urgent dabbing-his-brow-with-a-silk-handkerchief and smoking-a-lho-stick duties to perform. Kolea didn’t know the man’s name.

‘Guard gets to do all the hard work,’ said Baskevyl.

‘That, my friend, is the entire story of the galaxy,’ replied Gol.

‘At least we get to breathe some fresh air,’ Baskevyl shrugged.

‘This is fresh?’ asked Kolea, wrinkling his nose.

‘Well, not now we’re torching the place, no,’ said Baskevyl. ‘Still, better than ship air. That’s like living in an armpit.’

‘Or a sock that someone’s still wearing,’ said Fapes. They gazed at him.

‘I’ll carry on with the… checking things, sirs,’ Fapes said.

Bask’s micro-bead beeped. He exchanged a few words, then looked back at Kolea.

‘Maggs says he’s found the silo,’ he said.

‘Let’s go take a look,’ said Kolea.

III

They walked through the trees together. The occasional spears of sunlight

made the green shadow all the more oppressive. Insects hummed. There had been birdsong earlier, but the roar of the flamers and the chatter of blades had sent them bursting from the canopy in startled flocks.

'It has two moons,' said Baskevyl.

'What does?'

'Aigor 991. Two moons.'

'How do you know that?' asked Kolea.

'Because I read the briefing packet.'

'Why are you telling me this?'

'Because you *didn't* read the briefing packet?'

'I read the bits that Hark highlighted,' said Kolea. 'It was forty gakking pages long. I don't need to know about annual rainfall, highest elevation and the lesser-spotted wood-gargler.'

'The real reason is you can't read long words, isn't it, Gol?'

Kolea glared at him, then saw Baskevyl's grin.

'Funny man,' said Gol.

'So, anyway, it has two moons–'

'Why? Why are you telling me this?'

'Because you can't read.'

'Bask–' Gol growled.

'Because we're getting a day out, that's why,' replied Baskevyl, 'and I want you to enjoy the sights and natural wonders of the world, and I want to be able to explain them to you in painstaking detail.'

'Couldn't you just club me to death with a log?'

'Two moons. I want you to appreciate the sights.'

Kolea halted and stared up at the sky. Baskevyl did the same. All they could see were soaring tree trunks, coils of creepers, and a sea of green leaves, all locked in shadow.

'Sights?' Kolea said. 'It's not going to really fething matter if there are two moons, is it?'

IV

The stink of smoke and promethium grew stronger. Kolea felt the wet of sap vapour in the air.

The work teams had cleared a decent stretch. Kolea saw Lyse and Zered

moving into the dense undergrowth, hosing curls of yellow flame from their burner units. The noise of other flamers roared from nearby. Servitors hacked into foliage with whirring cutting blades or raked away cut or burned greenery.

Kolea's adjutant Rerval was waiting for them at the edge of the clearance area, with Luffrey, the sergeant in charge of Baskevyl's second platoon, and Caober, Kolea's chief scout.

Rerval flipped out a data-slate, slapped it to stabilise the flickering screen, and then scrolled open a schematic. In the shadow, the screen underlit his face.

'Definitely the right zone, sirs,' he said.

'Fapes will be delighted,' said Kolea.

'Beg pardon, major?' asked Rerval.

'Go on,' said Kolea with a 'never mind' gesture.

'The silo is here,' said Luffrey, leaning in to point to the slate. 'Large structure. Out front is a broad rockcrete apron, the landing platform. That's what we're clearing now.'

'Estimates?' asked Baskevyl.

'Providing we don't hit any snags,' said Caober, 'and the tanks don't run out, I think we'll have it open by nightfall.'

'You'll get to see the moons after all,' Baskevyl said to Kolea.

'Moons?' asked Luffrey.

'There are two–' began Baskevyl.

'Don't get him started again,' warned Kolea. He looked at Caober. 'Let's get a look at this silo.'

'Maggs is waiting for you,' said Caober.

'Luff,' said Baskevyl, 'lead us over. Caober, go find the senior Navy man and bring him to join us at the silo. He's got the access codes.'

'Which one is the senior Navy man?' asked Caober.

'Tall,' said Kolea. 'Dark blue tunic, silver brocade, walks like he's got an RPG lodged in his rectum.'

'Pretty much describes them all,' said Caober.

'Well, he probably isn't doing very much except standing around,' said Kolea.

'Still much of a muchness,' said Caober.

'Then use your improbably acute Tanith scouting skills and locate him,'

said Kolea.

‘On it,’ said Caober.

V

Led by Luffrey and Rerval, Kolea and Baskevyl headed into the clearance area. They passed Lyse, kneeling to connect up a fresh promethium tank, her goggles pushed up onto her sweaty forehead.

‘How are you doing?’ asked Kolea.

‘It’s fething hot,’ said Lyse. ‘Hot and wet and nasty.’

‘Good to see morale at a high,’ said Kolea.

‘And the shadows–’ began Lyse.

‘The what?’

‘The shadows, sir,’ she said, snap-fitting the last hose and rising to her feet. ‘The shadows here are really dense.’

‘Dense?’

‘I don’t know. It’s creepy here, isn’t it?’

‘It’s verdant,’ said Baskevyl.

‘What does that mean?’ asked Lyse.

‘It’s lush and green and beautiful,’ said Baskevyl, ‘and the shadows are just part of its dark, primordial grace. Also, it has two moons.’

‘The feth?’ asked Lyse, blankly.

‘You got that from the briefing packet, didn’t you?’ Kolea said to Baskevyl.

‘No indeed,’ said Baskevyl. ‘As a man unafraid of long words, I composed it myself, in order to reassure Trooper Lyse here that this *isn’t* the kind of death hole we usually end up with as a working environment.’

‘To be truthful, it didn’t really work,’ said Lyse. ‘And now I think you’re creepy as well.’

‘Don’t worry,’ Kolea told her. ‘Major Baskevyl will be dead by nightfall. By my hand. With a log. Carry on with your work.’

‘Yes, sir.’

The quartet moved on as Lyse started burning again. They passed two hacking servitors, then reached the lip of the stone apron Luffrey had mentioned. It rose about two metres above the forest floor, and the ancient rockcrete was scabbed with lichen, as well as scorch marks from flamers.

Kolea wondered how long the place had stood, and which long-dead Navy architect had commissioned it. The Navy had been building remote depots and supply drops for thousands of years. They were like ancient reliquaries. Like tombs.

Now I'm creeping myself out, Kolea thought.

They hauled themselves up onto the apron. Baskevyl, first up, reached out a hand to haul his friend Kolea. More flamer teams were working up there, led by Neskon, Dremmond and Lubba, brought in from other companies because of their fire expertise. Kolea raised a hand to Neskon, and the flame-trooper nodded back as he hosed liquid flame into the undergrowth. They had cleared part of the apron, and Kolea could already see some of the chevron markings on the platform emerging.

Caober's estimate had been generous, though. There was a lot to clear. They would be working into the night, until morning perhaps, as the vegetation was so thick.

Now they were standing in a cleared patch, with hard sunlight falling on them, it made the shadows of the forests and undergrowth seem darker. Creepy, just like Lyse had suggested. Bad shadows. Where had he heard that phrase? Bad shadows. Too dark. Too dense. The air was bright, the sun was strong, and the sky was pale blue, but where the forests stood, the shadows were as thick as Old Night.

'Hey, Gol,' said Baskevyl. He pointed up at the soft, blue sky. 'I told you.'

Two moons, vague as smudges of white chalk dust, one larger than the other, were just visible in the daylight sky, faint as ghosts.

'I imagine you're feeling terribly pleased with yourself right now,' said Kolea.

'It's a moment I'm going to cherish,' said Baskevyl grinning. 'Me and my old pal, under the ghost moons, contemplating the natural glories of the universe.'

Kolea sighed.

'Do they have names?' he asked.

'What?' asked Baskevyl.

'The two moons? Do they have names?'

'I don't know,' said Baskevyl. 'Does it matter?'

'A sight so beautiful, one should know the names.'

Bask paused.

‘You’re taking the piss, aren’t you?’ he asked.

‘He really is,’ said Rerval, sniggering.

‘I really fething am,’ growled Kolea. ‘Now let’s get on with the job.’

VI

They moved across the cleared part of the apron and back into the overgrowth. It was like stepping behind a curtain, from a lit room into a lightless one. Bad shadows surrounded them again. They seemed darker than before, deep green and black like the abyssal depths of an ocean, but Kolea reminded himself their eyes had become accustomed to light out in the cleared space.

‘This way,’ said Rerval, and immediately tripped over a creeper root. He picked himself up, and had to slap the data-slate a few times to get it to relight.

‘Classy,’ said Luffrey.

‘This thing,’ said Rerval, brandishing the data-slate, ‘works even better when it’s been pushed up someone’s arse sideways.’

‘Classier,’ laughed Luffrey.

Kolea ignored the banter. Luff and Rerval were good friends. They often sparred like this.

‘Give yourself a moment,’ said Baskevyl quietly. ‘Let your eyes get used to the darkness again. Just a moment, and then no more falling down like an idiot.’

They paused.

‘See? Better, right?’ asked Baskevyl.

‘Sure,’ said Kolea, but he didn’t think it was. The shadows seemed just as dark as before.

Bad shadows. Who had said that?

Kolea pulled out a lamp pack and switched it on. The lance of white light illuminated tree boles and snaking creepers as he played it around.

‘Come on,’ he said.

They crunched and clambered through the undergrowth. After a few minutes, they came upon the rusted skeleton of a Valkyrie gunship, entombed in a tangle of branches and leafy suckers.

‘How long’s that been here?’ Luffrey wondered.

‘Can’t be since the last supply drop,’ said Rerval. ‘It looks ancient.’

‘We’ll need to clear it, too,’ said Kolea. He looked at Baskevyl. ‘You think the servitors can move it?’

Bask shook his head.

‘I’ll vox up and have some heavies transported down,’ offered Rerval.

‘Yeah, do that,’ said Kolea.

Rerval pulled the vox-caster pack off his back, set it down, and began to nurse it to life.

‘*Armaduke*, *Armaduke*, this is the surface team, copy?’

Static buzzed.

Rerval repeated his call.

‘Nothing,’ he said, looking up at Kolea.

Kolea moved his lamp beam so as not to blind his adjutant.

‘This happens,’ said Baskevyl.

‘Yeah, all the time,’ said Kolea.

‘No, *here*,’ said Bask. ‘It was in the briefing packet. Vox-links can be disrupted from time to time by atmospheric magnetics.’

‘Let me guess,’ said Kolea. ‘The two moons?’

‘Uhm, yes, actually,’ said Baskevyl.

‘Yet they were *so* beautiful,’ Kolea snapped caustically. He looked at Rerval.

‘Try again in a few minutes,’ he told the adjutant.

‘Sir.’

Rerval rose and reslung the ’caster.

VII

‘You took your time,’ said Wes Maggs.

‘It was dark, and some of us fell over,’ said Kolea.

‘By some of us, he means Rerval,’ said Baskevyl. ‘Hey, Wes.’

Wes Maggs was the lead scout of D Company. He was also a rare example of a non-Tanith making the scout grade. He was crouched, gun flat across his thighs, his back against an ancient rockcrete wall. He rose, threw the majors a casual salute, and looked at Rerval.

‘You fell down?’

‘There was a creeper-related incident,’ said Rerval.

‘Try the vox again,’ Kolea told Rerval.

‘This is the silo?’ Baskevyl asked Maggs.

Maggs looked up into the dense darkness.

‘Pretty much. Right place, right ref. Big place, though you can’t see much of it.’

Kolea approached the rockcrete wall and placed a hand on it. It was wet with moss and lichen.

‘It slopes,’ he said.

‘Schematics say the depot is underground,’ said Maggs. ‘The cap, this part, is a pyramid.’

Like an ancient tomb, Kolea thought.

‘What’s up?’ Baskevyl asked him.

‘Nothing.’

‘Your face just then.’

Kolea drew Baskevyl to one side.

‘I’ll be honest, Braden,’ Kolea whispered. ‘I don’t like this, not one bit. There’s something about this place. Like Lyse said. It’s creepy.’

‘It’s just a depot, Gol.’

‘I know, I know, but the whole thing… the shadows… the trees… It’s just hitting all my alarm buttons.’

‘I thought you were a bit jumpy,’ said Baskevyl.

‘Sorry. I can’t explain it. Something…’

Baskevyl placed a reassuring hand on his friend’s massive shoulder.

‘I’ll tell you what it is, shall I?’ said Baskevyl.

‘Yeah, please do.’

‘Salvation’s Reach.’

‘What?’ asked Kolea.

‘We just went through fething hell.’

‘We’ve been through worse. I’ve been through worse,’ whispered Kolea.

‘The last time is always the worst,’ Baskevyl replied. ‘It’s the freshest. At the fething Reach, we lost friends. We lost good men. You’re still all wound up. You’re still on… what is it that Hark calls it?’

‘Fight time,’ said Kolea.

‘Yeah, right, fight time. You’re expecting the worst, and this isn’t it. You’re wound up tight.’

‘Maybe. And you’re not?’ asked Kolea.

‘Of course. I just don’t let it show like you do.’

‘Because you’re a professional soldier and I’m some scratch company lout?’ asked Kolea.

Baskevyl paused. He withdrew his hand.

‘No,’ he replied. ‘Because I’m Braden Baskevyl and you’re Gol Kolea and we do things differently, according to our characters.’

Kolea nodded.

‘Yeah, sorry. That was terrible of me. Sorry, Braden. I… Sorry.’

‘It’s fine,’ said Baskevyl.

‘It’s not,’ said Kolea. ‘That was out of line. I’m sorry. I just want you to know… There’s something about this place that has been freaking me out since we arrived. And it’s not just the fact we’re only three weeks out of combat.’

Baskevyl shrugged.

‘I know,’ said Baskevyl. ‘I felt it too, the moment I got here. I was trying to ignore it. It’s the shadows. Under the trees. The shadows are just… bad shadows. Like–’

‘What did you say?’ asked Kolea.

‘When?’ asked Baskevyl.

‘Just then. You said “bad shadows”.’

‘So?’

‘Where did you hear that, Bask?’

‘I didn’t hear it anywhere. I just said it. With words.’

Kolea looked away.

‘What’s the matter?’ Baskevyl asked him.

Kolea unslung his rifle.

‘Bad shadows. I don’t know why, but that phrase means something. I wish I could remember why.’

Click here to buy *Sabbat Crusade*.

OceanofPDF.com

THE BLACK LIBRARY NEWSLETTER

Sign up today for regular updates on the latest Black Library news and releases

SIGN UP NOW

OceanofPDF.com

A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

Angel of Fire first published in 2012.
Fist of Demetrius first published in 2013.
Fall of Macharius first published in 2014.

This eBook edition published in 2017 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd,
Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.
Cover illustration by Raymond Swanland.

The Macharian Crusade© Copyright Games Workshop Limited 2017. The Macharian Crusade, GW, Games Workshop, Black Library, The Horus Heresy, The Horus Heresy Eye logo, Space Marine, 40K, Warhammer, Warhammer 40,000, the ‘Aquila’ Double-headed Eagle logo, and all associated logos, illustrations, images, names, creatures, races, vehicles, locations, weapons, characters, and the distinctive likenesses thereof, are either ® or TM, and/or © Games Workshop Limited, variably registered around the world.
All Rights Reserved.

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-78572-550-0

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

See Black Library on the internet at
blacklibrary.com

Find out more about Games Workshop’s world of Warhammer and the Warhammer 40,000 universe at
games-workshop.com

OceanofPDF.com

eBook license

This license is made between:

Games Workshop Limited t/a Black Library, Willow Road, Lenton, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, United Kingdom (“Black Library”); and

(2) the purchaser of an e-book product from Black Library website (“You/you/Your/your”)

(jointly, “the parties”)

These are the terms and conditions that apply when you purchase an e-book (“e-book”) from Black Library. The parties agree that in consideration of the fee paid by you, Black Library grants you a license to use the e-book on the following terms:

* 1. Black Library grants to you a personal, non-exclusive, non-transferable, royalty-free license to use the e-book in the following ways:
    - 1.1 to store the e-book on any number of electronic devices and/or storage media (including, by way of example only, personal computers, e-book readers, mobile phones, portable hard drives, USB flash drives, CDs or DVDs) which are personally owned by you;
    - 1.2 to access the e-book using an appropriate electronic device and/or through any appropriate storage media; and
* 2. For the avoidance of doubt, you are ONLY licensed to use the e-book as described in paragraph 1 above. You may NOT use or store the e-book in any other way. If you do, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license.
* 3. Further to the general restriction at paragraph 2, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license in the event that you use or store the e-book (or any part of it) in any way not expressly licensed. This includes (but is by no means limited to) the following circumstances:
    - 3.1 you provide the e-book to any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;
    - 3.2 you make the e-book available on bit-torrent sites, or are

otherwise complicit in ‘seeding’ or sharing the e-book with any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.3 you print and distribute hard copies of the e-book to any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.4 you attempt to reverse engineer, bypass, alter, amend, remove or otherwise make any change to any copy protection technology which may be applied to the e-book.

* 4. By purchasing an e-book, you agree for the purposes of the Consumer Protection (Distance Selling) Regulations 2000 that Black Library may commence the service (of provision of the e-book to you) prior to your ordinary cancellation period coming to an end, and that by purchasing an e-book, your cancellation rights shall end immediately upon receipt of the e-book.

* 5. You acknowledge that all copyright, trademark and other intellectual property rights in the e-book are, shall remain, the sole property of Black Library.

* 6. On termination of this license, howsoever effected, you shall immediately and permanently delete all copies of the e-book from your computers and storage media, and shall destroy all hard copies of the e-book which you have derived from the e-book.

* 7. Black Library shall be entitled to amend these terms and conditions from time to time by written notice to you.

* 8. These terms and conditions shall be governed by English law, and shall be subject only to the jurisdiction of the Courts in England and Wales.

* 9. If any part of this license is illegal, or becomes illegal as a result of any change in the law, then that part shall be deleted, and replaced with wording that is as close to the original meaning as possible without being illegal.

* 10. Any failure by Black Library to exercise its rights under this

license for whatever reason shall not be in any way deemed to be a waiver of its rights, and in particular, Black Library reserves the right at all times to terminate this license in the event that you breach clause 2 or clause 3.

OceanofPDF.com